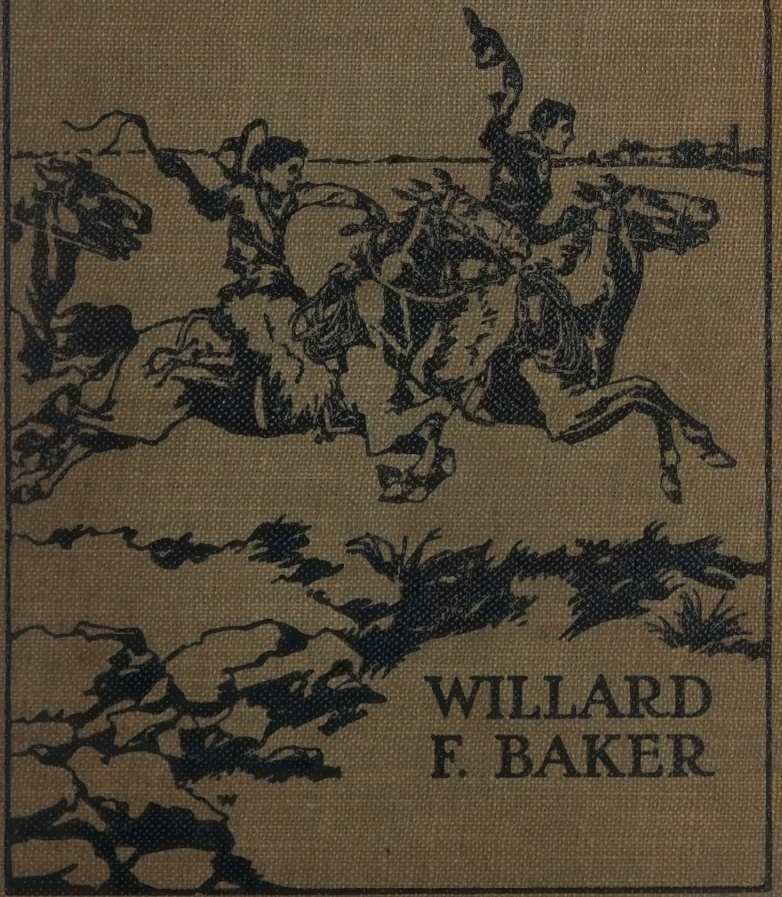
THE BOY RANCHERS IN CAMP



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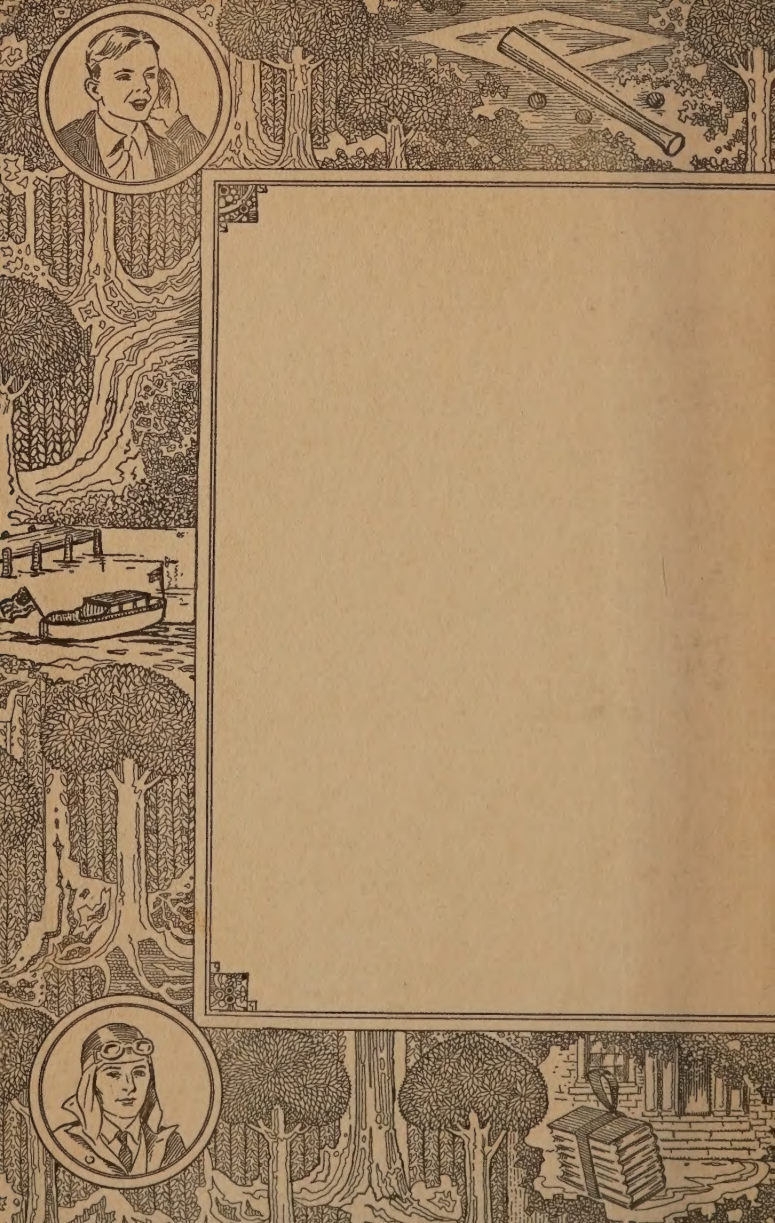
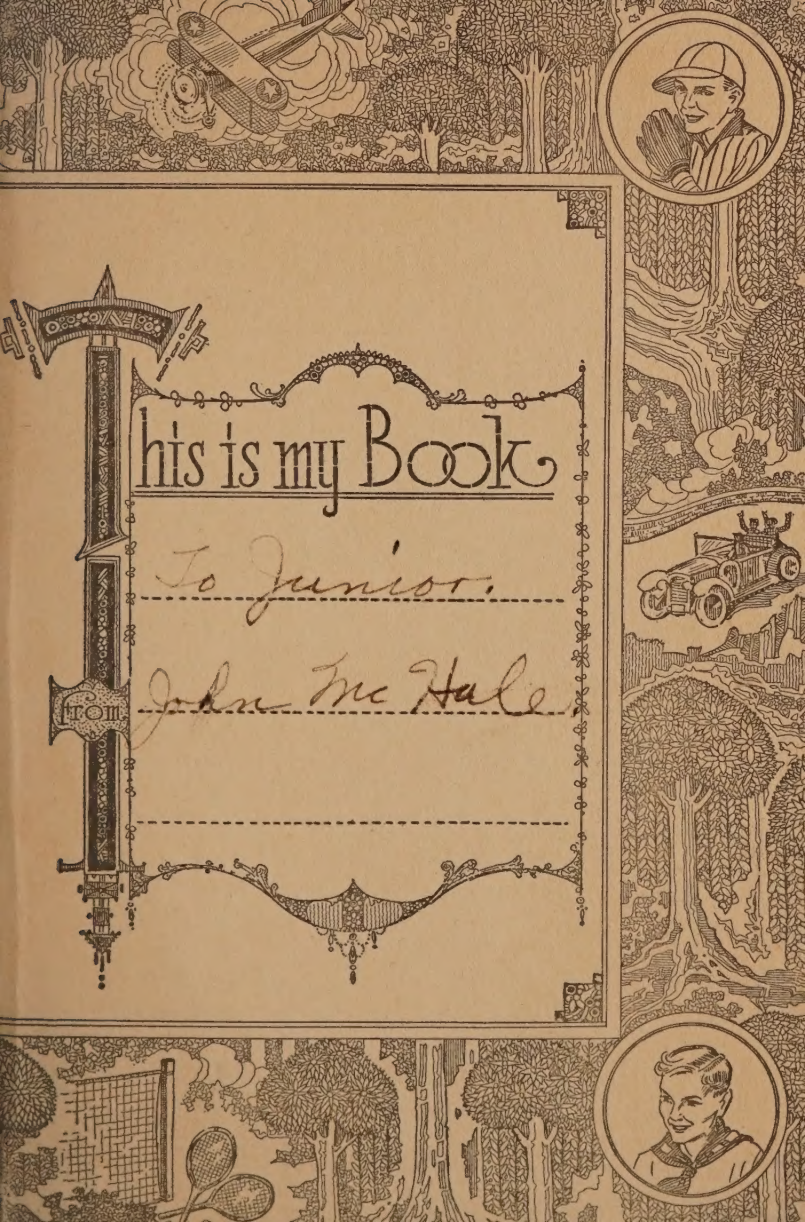
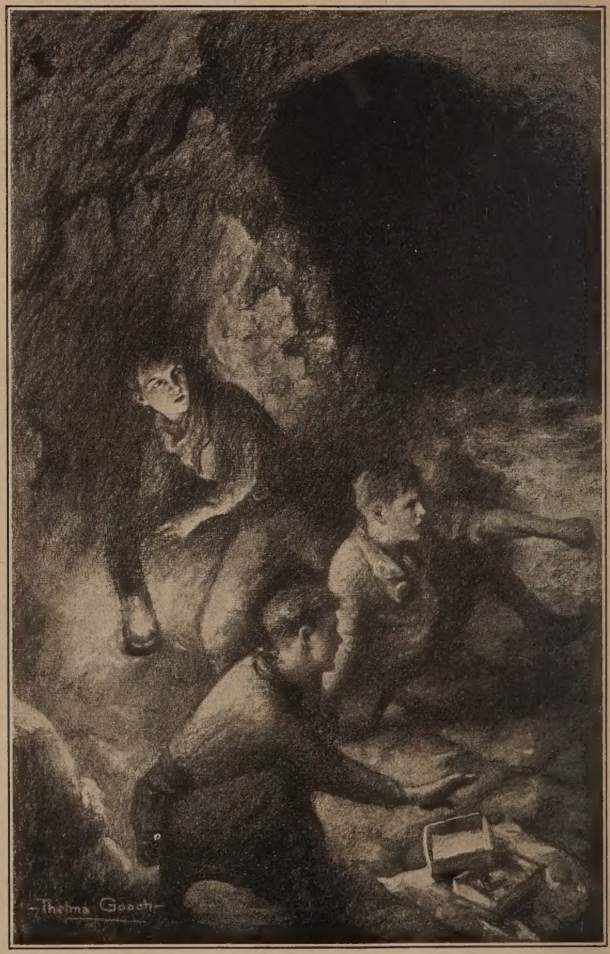



This is my Book
To Junior.
From John McHale



"LOOK OUT!" QUICKLY YELLED NORT. "JUMP FOR YOUR LIVES! IT'S A FLOOD!"

THE BOY RANCHERS IN CAMP

OR

The Water Fight at Diamond X

By

WILLARD F. BAKER

Author of "The Boy Ranchers," "The Boy Ranchers on the Trail," etc.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY

THE BOY RANCHERS SERIES

By WILLARD F. BAKER

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THE BOY RANCHERS
or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X

THE BOY RANCHERS IN CAMP
or The Water Fight at Diamond X

THE BOY RANCHERS ON THE TRAIL
or The Diamond X After Cattle Rustlers

Other Volumes in Preparation

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THE BOY RANCHERS IN CAMP

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THE BOY RANCHERS IN CAMP

CHAPTER I

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

"LOOK out there, Bud! Look out! There you go!"

"Side-stepping soap dishes! What's the idea? Whoa, there, Sock!"

The pinto pony reared, swerved sharply to one side as a black streak shot across the trail almost under his feet and then, when the animal came to a sudden stop, there shot over his head the boy who had given vent to the last exclamation.

Bud Merkel came down sprawling on all fours in a bunch of grass which served, in a great measure, to break the force of the catapult over his pony's head. And then, as the lad righted himself and limped over to catch his steed, he cried:

"What in the name of the petrified prune pie was that, Billee?"

"A jack, Bud! A jack rabbit, and as black as gunpowder! Yo' shore are in for some bad luck, now!"

"Bad luck! I should say so! Almost breaking my neck, and laming Sock," and the lad looked anxiously at his pinto, being relieved to find, however, that the animal had suffered no harm.

"But this won't be all!" declared Billee Dobb. "I never see a black jack shoot in front of a man yet that bad luck didn't follow!"

"Well, let's make it go some to catch us!" suggested Bud as he leaped to the saddle, after making sure that the girths were tight. "Black jack! First one I ever saw," and he looked off in the distance toward a streak of dust, which was all that now represented the frightened rabbit that had shot across the trail so unexpectedly.

"They aren't plentiful; thank your stars!" exclaimed the old cowboy. "I'm glad it didn't happen to *me.*"

"Yes, if you'd a'toppled over your critter's head there'd be a bigger crack in the ground!" laughed Bud, as he looked at his companion's greater girth and weight. "It came as sudden as a flash of lightning, that jack!"

"Bad luck allers does come that-a-way," croaked Old Billee Dobb.

"Oh, you and your bad luck!" laughed Bud. "Come on now, hump yourself! Hump your-

self, you old soap-footing specimen of a slab of saltpeter!" he cried to his pony. "Mosey along!"

"What's your rush, Bud? Anybody's take a notion t' think you was in suthin' of a hurry, t' hear you talkin' that-a-way t' your critter," remarked Billee as he ambled along behind his more impetuous companion.

"Hurry, Billee? Of course I'm in a hurry!" admitted Bud, a tall, well-tanned lad as he adjusted himself to his saddle, and dashed ahead of his companion on the dusty trail. "I reckon you'd be in a rush, too, if your cousins that you hadn't seen since last fall were coming to camp all summer with you!" and Bud Merkel swung around in his creaking saddle to note the pace of his companion.

"Them two tenderfeet comin' out to Diamond X ag'in?" asked Old Billee Dobb.

"Course they are!" answered Bud. "But they're a long shot from being tenderfeet, now, since they helped get rid of Del Pinzo and his cattle-rustling gang, and did their share in solving the mystery of the Triceratops. Tenderfeet! Guess you'd better not let 'em *hear* you call 'em that!"

"Mebby not, son! Mebby not!" agreed Old Billee, rather mildly as he tried to urge his slower-going animal to keep pace with Bud's. For the pinto, responding to the spur of voice and heel, had shot ahead. "I sorter forgot

your cousins did have a hand in the lively doin's at Diamond X last season. So they're coming out again, be they?"

"Yes, and we're going to make a camp of it, over in Flume Valley. I'm going to raise there the finest bunch of steers you ever hazed to the stock yards, and Nort and Dick are going to help me. I'm riding to meet them now at the water-hole, and we're going back to stay all summer in Flume Valley."

"Hum! Flume Valley!" mused the older cowboy, for both riders were of that class, though Bud Merkel was the son of the man who owned Diamond X, and other important western ranches. "Flume Valley! That's where your paw started that irrigation scheme; ain't it?"

"Yes," replied Bud. "It was only a waste bit of land before dad ran the water through the tunnel-flume from Pocut River, but now it grows the best grass you ever rolled your bed in. And the steers—you ought to see 'em, Billee!"

"Well, I'm aimin' to, right soon," responded the old man. "Your paw was sayin' suthin' about putting me over there, but I didn't pay much attention to it. So you and the eastern lads are going to camp in Flume Valley, be you?"

"Yes, because, being an experiment, dad didn't want to build any ranch houses there

yet. But if we make good on the deal, and can raise steers on the grass that's grown since the water was let in, why, I'm to have it for my own ranch, when I come of age, and Dick and Nort will be my partners. We'll call it Diamond X Second."

"Good name! Mighty good name! Look out there, you old piece of bacon fat!" he called sharply to his animal, pulling the pony quickly up as it stumbled. "There aren't any prairie dog holes here for you t' go puttin' your foot in! What's the matter of yo'?"

But though Old Billee and Bud spoke thus in seeming harshness to their horses, there was no unkindness in their treatment of the animals. It was just their picturesque, western manner of talking, and hardly had the echo of Old Billee's words died away on the hot, dusty air than he was gently patting the neck of the pony he rode.

"Did dad say you were to help me over in Flume Valley?" asked Bud, as he slowed down the pace of his animal to keep alongside that of the older cowboy.

"Yes, he said I was to be your helper. And first I sorter hated to leave Babe, Slim, Snake and the rest of the bunch. But if you say your cousins are coming out, and if we can raise better cattle there than on the home ranch, why, mebby it won't be so worse."

"Of course it won't!" cried Bud. "Why,

even in the short time the steers have been in Flume Valley, Billee, they've improved."

"You say there's stock there now?" asked the old man, for he was gray-haired. "Well, if they've been thrivin' by themselves so far, what's the good of you an' your cousins campin' there to watch 'em eat?"

"Lots of reasons," answered Bud, as he and his companion started up a hill, on the other side of which they would reach the water-hole, where the main trail from Diamond X came in. "For one thing this is something new, and dad wants it watched carefully. Then, too, the water pipe and reservoir will need looking after. But, more than anything else, it's Del Pinzo and his gang of rustlers."

"Those scoundrels didn't get what they deserved for tryin' to run off our stock last year!" complained Billee. "Now they're raisin' ructions again; be they?"

"They sure are!" declared Bud. "It wasn't that they didn't get what they deserved, for they were sentenced to long terms. But the trouble was they didn't stay in jail where they were put."

"I reckon they look at it just the other way!" chuckled Billee.

"Yes," agreed Bud. "But it's going to make trouble for dad and all the other cattle raisers around here having that bunch of Mexicans and Greasers loose. That's one reason why

we've got to watch out at Flume Valley, where we're going to try to raise some cattle that will beat those at Diamond X. I'm glad you're going to be with me, Billee."

"Hum! You don't care what sort of trouble th' old man gits into; do you, Bud?" and he smiled a toothless smile at his employer's son. "Well, it's all in th' day's work, I reckon. But I'm not expected t' come with you to-night; am I? Slim said I was to report t' him at the main buildin's."

"No, you don't have to come right away," replied Bud. "I'm to meet Dick and Nort at the water-hole—they were due at our ranch this morning—and you're to come when you can."

"Might as well be quick as sooner," laughed the old cowboy. "I don't take much to new-fangled notions. But orders is orders, I reckon."

"Oh, there isn't so much new at Flume Valley," said Bud. "All it ever needed to make one of the best places in this part of the country for raising cattle was water. Now, since dad had the big pipe flume put in from Pocut River, where it can fill the reservoir and water the grass and the cattle at the same time, things are going to boom!"

"They are to hear you tell 'em!" chuckled Billee. "Well, I wish you all good luck, Bud, an' I'll help all I can. I'll be over to-night, if

I can make it, though it's some of a ride after a day's work."

"Oh, I won't expect you," said Bud. "I've got everything all laid out for the camp there. Nort and Dick will be with me, but we'll be on the lookout for you to-morrow. Bring what things you need, and some grub. And if my mother has any pies baked, just pack a few of them."

"Only a *few?*" asked Billee, with a grin.

"As many as Nell will let you take," laughed Bud. "But there's Nort and Dick! Whoop! Oh, boy! Come a-runnin'!" and the young rancher beat a tattoo with his heels on the sides of his steed, and raced down the slope toward two other lads who, like himself, were attired in conventional western costume. Old Billee pulled his steed to a halt and watched the greetings.

"It's a great thing to be young!" sighed the old man. "The greatest thing in the world! But maybe I can do something yet! Only I don't like that black jack—I shore don't! Never heard of anythin' but bad luck followin' one of them nimble cusses! I don't like it for a cent!"

"Well, here we are!" cried Nort Shannon, flinging his broad-brimmed hat into the air, and catching it on the end of his .45 before the headpiece could touch the ground.

"Came right on time, too! Zip Foster

couldn't 'a' made it better!" joyously declared Bud, clapping his palm into that of Nort.

"Haven't you run him off the ranch yet?" asked the other lad, who was rather short and stout, not to say fat.

"Run who off?" asked Bud.

"Zip Foster!" repeated Dick. "Last I heard of him——"

"Never mind *him!*" and Bud seemed somewhat annoyed at having mentioned the name. "Oh, but I'm glad you fellows are here! Have a good trip? Are you hungry? Did you have grub enough? Can you ride right out now? How's everybody at my house?"

Nort looked at his western cousin, and then, with a deliberate motion pretended to mop his face free of some imaginary perspiration, brought out by the rapid-fire questions on his cousin's part.

"Say! Go a bit easy, will you, Bud?" he begged. "One at a time! Line forms on this side!"

"We're going right out with you, and everybody's fine!" answered Dick, summing up matters. "Your father said we were to ride out and meet you here at the water-hole. We've got as much of our outfits as we'll need for a few days, and so let's mosey along. Oh, but it's great to be back out west!"

"You got off a ripe one that time!" agreed Nort. "Who's that up there?" he asked, point-

ing to the figure of a solitary horseman on the hill down which Bud had ridden.

"Looks like Yellin' Kid," commented Dick.

"It's Old Billee," answered Bud. "He's going to be with us out at Flume Valley. Did dad tell you of the new venture?" he asked his cousins.

"Yes, and it sounds good. Must have been quite a trick to bring water from Pocut River, Bud."

"Well, it would have been if Professor Wright hadn't showed dad how to use an old underground water course for part of the way. Then it was easy. And say—you ought to see what a difference water has made in that valley! It was almost a desert before we irrigated."

"I'm anxious to see it!" said Nort.

"We can't get there any too soon to suit me," added Dick. "Just think! We're going to be our own bosses—boy ranchers for fair!"

"You intimated plenty that time!" cried Bud. "Well, let's hit the trail!"

The three boy ranchers started off, Nort and Dick accompanying Bud back over the way the latter had come. As they rode up the hill Old Billee passed on down another trail, leading to Diamond X proper.

"Howdy, boys!" called the old cowboy from the distance to Nort and Dick. "See you a bit later over at your own ranch!" he added, and

then, with a friendly wave of his hand, he went down into a little swale, or valley, and was lost to sight.

"Now for some good times!" cried Bud, as he rode between his two eastern cousins, who had again come to spend the summer with him in the great western outdoors.

"If it's anything like last year we sure will have a bang-up vacation!" declared Nort.

"Well, I can't promise anything like that—with cattle rustling and digging up animals ten million years old," laughed Bud. "But I think we might have a little excitement."

"How?" asked Nort and Dick eagerly.

"Tell you later," promised Bud.

They rode on, talking over old times and planning new ones, and as the shadows began to lengthen they rode down into a triangular valley, at one end of which a rude dam could be noticed, while, scattered over the green carpeted floor, were hundreds of grazing cattle.

"Say, this is some slick place!" cried Dick.

"The best ever!" affirmed Nort. "And is this where we are to camp and ranch it?"

"Right here," declared Bud. "Course we haven't any ranch house yet. But we've got a tent—there it is," and he pointed to a white canvas shelter not far from the dam.

"A tent! Oh, boy! better and better!" yelled Dick, as he urged his pony forward.

As the three boy ranchers neared their head-

quarters, represented by two or three tents grouped together, there emerged from among them the figure of a man on horseback.

"There's old Buck Tooth," said Bud.

"Who?" asked the eastern cousins.

"Buck Tooth—a Zuni Indian that dad picked up somewhere. He's one of the best herd-riders you'd want, and he and I are great friends. Wonder what's the matter, though? He acts as though something had happened."

Bud pulled rein, to allow a better observation of the figure that was, obviously, riding out to meet him. Nort and Dick also halted their ponies. But Buck Tooth rode to meet them at great speed, sitting in the saddle as though part of it and the horse. He rode in a manner that made Nort and Dick envy him.

"What's the matter, Buck?" asked Bud, as soon as the Indian was within hailing distance. And then Nort and Dick could see why he was called that. A large, yellow-stained tooth protruded from his mouth, giving him not exactly a pleasant expression.

"What's wrong, Buck, you ride so *pronto* like?" demanded the young western ranch boy.

"Heap wrong!" came the answer in guttural tones. "You no shut off water in pipe; eh?"

"Shut off the irrigation water? I should say not!" cried Bud. "Why, has anyone?"

"Water no come! All gone! No run splash-splash now!" and Buck Tooth waved his hand

toward the reservoir made by a dam that curved out in a half circle from the wall of natural rock.

"The water gone!" cried Bud. "This is strange! Let's have a look!"

He and his cousins rode at top speed to the reservoir that had reclaimed Flume Valley from the semi-desert it had long been. Dismounting, they climbed the slope and saw that from the great iron pipe, which was wont to spout a sparkling stream, there came only a few drops and trickles.

"It's disappeared!" said Bud in a low voice. "The water has taken another course! This means the end of Flume Valley, I reckon!"

CHAPTER II

A NIGHT RIDE

THE boy ranchers stood looking down into the reservoir, which was almost full of water, but which was slowly running out through the different gates, some to concrete drinking troughs where thirsty cattle congregated, and some to distant meadows where it supplied moisture for the grass on which the steers of Diamond X Second fed. From the slightly ruffled surface of the reservoir, as the evening wind blew across the water, the gazes of Bud, Nort and Dick sought the faces of one another.

"This looks bad!" murmured Bud, while Buck Tooth, the Zuni Indian, grunted something in his own incomprehensible dialect.

"What does it mean?" asked Nort, as he looked down the slope from the reservoir to the group of tents that was to form the home of himself, his brother and cousin for several months, while they were in camp.

"It means the water supply, on which I depended to raise these steers, has petered out,"

answered Bud, and there was a worried note in his voice.

"You mean stopped for good?" asked Dick.

"I hope not," went on Bud. "But from what you can see—no water coming through the pipe line that dad laid to the Pocut River—I should say there was a break in it somewhere, and it will have to be fixed right away—that is, if I'm to keep these cattle here," and he looked down the valley where the bunches of steers were ever on the move, seeking new places to feed, or coming to drink water from the supply flowing out of the reservoir.

"We seem to have struck a job right off the bat!" remarked Dick, as he picked up a stone and tossed it into the reservoir.

"Just as we did when we came west before, and had to jump out and help the queer professors," added Nort. "But we're ready to go to work, Bud. All you'll have to do is say the word and——"

But Bud did not seem to be paying much attention to what his cousin was saying. Instead his gaze followed that of his Zuni Indian helper. Buck Tooth was looking off up the hill under which the big pipe ran to the distant Pocut River on the other side of the mountain. And as Bud and Buck Tooth looked, and as the gaze of Nort and Dick was bent in the same direction, they all beheld a figure on the back of a

fast-moving pony, riding up the trail that led over Snake Mountain.

"Who's that, Buck? See him!" yelled Bud.

"No can tell. Old Billee, mebby!" grunted the Indian.

"No! Old Billee just left me! He's back at the ranch house. But that's a stranger, and I don't like strangers sneaking around my ranch —especially when there's a break just happened to my pipe line!" exclaimed Bud. "I'm going to look into this!"

"Hi there! Hold on a minute! I want to talk to you!" he yelled, making a megaphone of his hands and directing it at the figure on the back of the sturdy pony that was scrambling up the mountain trail. "Wait a minute!"

But this the stranger seemed unwilling to do. The watching group near the reservoir saw him raise his quirt, or short whip, and bring it down savagely on the back of the pony, which, already, was doing its best to carry its master out of distance.

Then, with a quick motion, Bud drew his .45, and though both Nort and Dick saw him aim it high above the man's head, in order to shoot over him, horse and rider went down in a tumbled heap at the sound of the report, which followed as Bud pulled the trigger.

"You've winged him!" cried Dick.

"Shucks! Didn't mean to hit him—just shot to scare him!" declared Bud. "But we'll have

to see about it now! Come on!" he cried, and he ran down the side of the reservoir to where he had left Sock, his pony, followed by Dick and Nort who also headed for their steeds.

"Hu!" grunted the Indian, as he came on down more leisurely. "No water—man shot—new boys come—big time, mebby! Hu!"

And Buck Tooth was more than right. Big times impended in Flume Valley.

While Bud Merkel and his two cousins who had arrived from the east only the day before were mounting their ponies, to ride up the side of Snake Mountain, and seek the man Bud had shot, I shall have a chance to tell my new readers something about the boy ranchers, and the volume that immediately precedes this one.

The book is entitled "The Boy Ranchers; or Solving the Mystery at Diamond X." Norton, or Nort, and Dick, or Richard, Shannon were sons of Mr. and Mrs. Thornton Shannon, and their home was in the east. When Mr. Shannon, the summer previous, had been obliged to make a trip to South America, with his wife, he sent his sons to spend their vacation at Diamond X, one of the western cattle ranches owned by Henry Merkel, Mrs. Shannon's brother.

Almost immediately on their arrival Nort and Dick, who were then rightly classed as "tenderfeet," became involved in a strange mystery. A call for help came, and they took part in the rescue of two college professors who had been

attacked by a band of Mexicans and "Greasers," the latter being a low-class Mexican.

The professors were rescued, but the mystery only deepened. What it was, and how it came to be solved, you will find set down at length in the first volume. Sufficient to say, here, that Nort and Dick, as it were, "cut their eye teeth," during the exciting experiences that followed their arrival at Diamond X.

The eastern boys learned how properly to ride a pony cowboy fashion, they learned the use of the branding iron, the lariat and "gun," as the .45 revolvers were universally called. They learned, also, how to "ride herd," "ride line" and how to live in the open, with the prairie grass for a bed and the star-studded sky for a blanket, their saddle forming the pillow.

Mr. Merkel, Bud's father, owned several ranches besides Diamond X, so named because that brand was used on the cattle from it. He had Square M, and Triangle B, the explanation of which names are obvious.

When it came time for Nort and Dick to return east, as winter approached, they left, promising to return as soon as their summer vacation should arrive, for they were determined to become boy ranchers in earnest, an ambition in which Bud shared.

Now it was summer again, and Nort and Dick had once more journeyed to their uncle's ranch, to be met by Bud, as arranged, at the water-

hole. For between the two visits of the easterners some changes had been made at Diamond X.

Bud had been clamoring to be allowed to raise some cattle "on his own," and his father had consented. Off to the north of Diamond X, and in a depression between the Snake Mountains on the east and Buffalo Ridge on the west, was another valley, well sheltered from the wintry blasts. This valley was owned by Mr. Merkel, and though part of it was timbered, and some scattered sections produced an excellent variety of grass for stock, there was no dependable source of drinking water available. And without water at hand it is impossible to raise cattle in the west—or any place else, for that matter.

How to get water to "Flume Valley," as it came to be called, was a problem. It would have been put to use raising cattle long before this had Mr. Merkel been able to get any water there for the animals to drink, and also some to irrigate the more arid portions so that fodder would grow.

At the foot of the eastern slope of Snake Mountains ran the Pocut River, which served to supply not only Diamond X, Square M and Triangle B ranches with water, but also those of Double Z and Circle T, the respective holdings of Hank Fisher and Thomas Ogden. But though Pocut River gave plenty of water to Bud's father and the other ranchmen, none was

available for the isolated valley which, except for this, would have been an ideal place to raise steers.

And it was here that the good services of Professor Wright, one of the scientists mentioned in the first volume, came into play. For Professor Wright discovered an ancient underground water course, connecting with Pocut River, and when this had been partly tunneled, re-opened at places where it had caved in, and a big iron pipe laid part of the way, water came gushing out into Flume Valley, as Bud renamed the place, it having been called Buffalo Wallow before that time; probably when there was water in it and the buffalo made it a rendezvous.

And when the water came through the iron pipe, falling into the reservoir that had been built to hold it in reserve, Bud was allowed to begin his experiment in stock raising.

His father provided him with the cattle, and Bud was a boy rancher in reality now. His cousins had agreed to help him in the venture on their arrival, and Bud had been expecting them when he rode out with Old Billee that day. Old Billee was one of the Diamond X cowboys, and he might have been made a foreman, except that he had no executive ability. He could do as he was told, and that was about all. He was reliable and dependable, but had no initiative for big undertakings. Old Billee,

with Buck Tooth and some other cowboys, had been assigned to help Bud in his venture.

As Bud has told his cousins, when he rode to meet them at the water-hole, on the trail from Diamond X ranch, there was no time, yet, to construct ranch houses in Flume Valley. Tents would have to serve the purpose, and the boys were rather pleased, than otherwise, with this.

"It will be just like camp!" said Bud.

And so the easterners had arrived, and, almost with the moment of their coming, there had begun the first act in what was to prove a drama of almost tragic happenings.

"You stay at the camp, Buck!" called Bud to the Zuni, as the three boy ranchers mounted and prepared to ride up to where the unknown man had collapsed after Bud had fired. "You stick around! Old Billee, or some of the boys from Diamond X may ride over, though I don't expect them until morning. Stay here, Buck!"

"Me stick!" gutturally answered the Indian. "You catchum man mebby—git back water."

"Maybe," agreed Bud, as he and his cousins trotted off up the trail, which wound around the reservoir and over the mountain.

Dusk was falling as the boys reached the vicinity of the place whence they had seen the lone rider emerge from the bushes, spurring his horse up the rocky trail that led over Snake Mountain, as the whole ridge was known.

"Must have been about here," said Dick, as

he reined in his steed, for which the panting animal, doubtless, was grateful.

"Little farther on, I think," said his brother.

"No, it was right here," declared Bud, as he dismounted and began to scan the ground. "Here's where his horse slipped," and he pointed to the tell-tale marks on the trail.

"Yes, and look—you hit him all right!" added Dick.

He indicated some dull, red spots on the stones. Bud reached down and gingerly touched them.

"Blood!" he murmured. "Guess I did wing him—or the horse—but I don't see how I could. I fired high."

"But where did he go?" asked Nort, following the marks left by a horse that had, obviously, been hard pressed. "See, the sign goes right up to this rocky wall, and then stops. He couldn't have gotten up there, could he?"

"Not unless he wore wings," said Bud grimly. "But it's getting too dark to see well. We'd better be getting back to camp."

"I thought you were going to follow this up, and see what had happened to your pipe line," suggested Dick.

"I am, but we can't ride on without some grub. No telling what we may stack up against. We'll have to make a night ride of it, I'm thinking, and I'd like to have Buck Tooth along. He's a shark on following a blind trail. Come

on, we'll go back to camp, get some grub and then take this up again. I hope I didn't kill him, though," murmured Bud, as he again leaped to the saddle, an example followed by Nort and Dick.

"Who was he?" asked the latter, puffing slightly from his exertions, for he was much stouter than his brother Nort.

"Search me!" replied Bud. "Looked mighty suspicious, though, the way he rode off. And if he wasn't up to something wrong he'd 'a' stopped when I hailed him."

"Do you think he had anything to do with the break in the pipe?" asked Nort.

"You've got me again," confessed his western cousin. "We'll have to make a night ride of it and find out."

They rode back to the camp tents, to find Buck Tooth calmly smoking his red-stone Indian pipe, and gazing off in the darkening distance at nothing at all, as far as the boys could determine.

"Anybody been around, Buck?" asked Bud.

"Nope!" was the answer. "You catchum dead man?"

"Not a sign, Buck! Reckon he must have dug a hole and pulled it in after him. But we've got to find out what's the matter with the pipe line. There's only a few days' supply of water in the reservoir. Rustle out some grub, and we'll ride over the mountain."

"Um," grunted the Zuni, and a little later, after a hasty meal of flapjacks, bacon and coffee, the boy ranchers, with the old Zuni Indian, started on a night ride over the mountain trail, in the general direction of the pipe line, the supply of fluid for which had so mysteriously stopped.

But strange events were only just beginning to happen in Flume Valley. There were others in store for the boy ranchers.

CHAPTER III

THE WARNING

"WILL it be safe to leave our camp alone, like this?" asked Nort, as he and his companions rode off, leaving behind them the white tents, gleaming in the wondrous light of a full moon.

"Why not?" inquired Bud. "It won't walk away."

"No, but some one might come in and take everything."

"There isn't much worth taking. You brought your old stuff with you, we have our ponies, so all they could snibby would be the camp dishes, and they aren't worth the risk."

"Could they drive off any of your cattle?" asked Dick.

"Why don't you say *our* cattle?" asked Bud with a smile, which was plainly to be seen in the brilliant moonlight. "You fellows are in this venture with me, you know."

"We haven't yet gotten used to thinking of it that way," remarked Nort, as he rode beside Buck Tooth. The old Zuni Indian managed to

keep pace beside the boys without ever urging his pony forward, a trick of riding which even Bud envied.

"Well, you'd *better* get used to it," was the laughing retort. "Your dad staked you to part of the expenses of this deal, same as mine did me, and of course you'll share in the profits—if there are any," Bud added rather dubiously. "And if we don't get that water back there won't be enough to make you need a hat to carry 'em off."

"As bad as that?" inquired Nort.

"Oh, I'm not saying it's bad—*yet!*" exclaimed Bud. "There may be just a stoppage in the pipe, which can easily be cleaned out. Or, it may be—something else."

But what else it might be he did not say, and Nort and Dick were not sufficiently familiar with irrigation and flume lines to hazard a guess. But they knew enough about their cousin to tell that he was worried.

"What do you plan to do?" asked Dick, as the four rode on, their ponies occasionally stumbling as they mounted the rocky trail that led over Snake Mountain. "Look for that man—the one you——"

"The one I *didn't* shoot!" interrupted Bud. "I'm as sure I didn't hit him as I am that we four are here this minute. I know I fired too high!"

"Unless the bullet hit a rock and glanced down," suggested Nort.

"Well, yes, that *may* have happened," admitted Bud. "But if he was badly hurt he couldn't get away, as he did."

"Could he have fallen into any hole or gully?" asked Dick. "We didn't look for that."

"He might have," admitted the western lad. "But what I'm looking for, now, isn't that fellow, who may or may not be shot, but for the break in my flume—that's what I want to locate. Once I get the water so it's running back in my reservoir I'll feel better. For if there's a permanent shut-off we might as well move out of Flume Valley," he went on. "The cattle would just naturally die of thirst!"

"Isn't there any water at all?" asked Nort, as he pulled his pony up sharply when the animal stumbled.

"Not enough to water all the stock I aim to raise," answered Bud. "At the far end of the valley—away from our camp—the grass grows pretty well, for some rain does fall there once in a while. But there isn't a water-hole worth the name, and you know what happens to cattle when they can't get a drink!"

"I should say so!" commented Nort, for he and his brother had seen some of the terrible suffering caused by animals having to be driven long distances without any water being available. "Then the pipe line is your only hope?"

"That, and the ancient underground watercourse it connects with to bring water from the Pocut River," replied Bud. "You see, there's a sort of natural tunnel under the mountain, and this was once an old river bed. I suppose, or at least Professor Wright has told us, that once this tunnel was full-up with water. But there was a change in the direction of the old stream, and the water tunnel dried up. However, it didn't cave in, except in a few places, and we now use it to bring water to Flume Valley. There is really only a comparatively short length of pipe at either end, one end being where the water from the Pocut River enters, and the other where the pipe delivers the water to our reservoir."

"How are you going to find the break?" asked Dick.

"Or stoppage?" suggested Nort.

"Well, I aim to ride over the mountain tonight," answered Bud, "and see if all is clear at the river intake end of the line. If it is, I'll know there must be a stoppage, or break, somewhere inside the old water tunnel."

"How you going to find that?" inquired Nort.

"Why, we'll get lanterns and ride through," replied Bud. "That's easy!"

"Ride through an underground river!" cried Dick. "You can't!"

"No, we couldn't if the old underground river course was *full,*" agreed Bud, "but it *isn't.*

There's only a comparatively small amount of water flowing through the old course, which is wide enough for two of us to ride or walk abreast, and twice as high as you need. I've ridden through more than once. It's like a long, natural tunnel under the mountain, with water flowing in the center depression, so to speak."

"Must be rather spooky inside there," suggested Nort.

"It is a little; and it's nearly an all-day's ride. But it's the only way to find the trouble. Professor Wright said that some day the water might work through, and go off on a new course, and in that case I'd be dished until I could stop up the break."

"Well, we'll help all we can," offered Nort.

"Sure thing!" echoed his brother.

"We'd better take it a bit easy now," spoke Bud, as the ascent of the mountain became more steep. "We don't want to wind the ponies, and we may have a hard day ahead of us to-morrow."

"It *is* quite a climb," admitted Nort. "Are we going to ride all night?"

"No, we'll turn in about midnight," said Bud. "But this will give us a start so we can get to the Pocut River end of the flume by morning. We can stop any time you fellows want to."

"Oh, we aren't tired!" Dick hastened to say, a sentiment with which his brother agreed.

"This is as much fun as riding herd, and driving off the cattle rustlers."

"Glad you like it," commented Bud. "And the rustlers might as well drive off our stock, if we don't soon get this water to running again. Old Billee said I'd have bad luck when that black rabbit crossed my path, and it sure is coming!"

"What black rabbit was that?" asked Nort, curiously.

"One that gave me a tumble when I was riding to meet you," answered Bud. "I never saw one before, and I don't want to again. Not that I'm superstitious, but there sure is something queer about *this!* I don't like it for a cent!"

The boy ranchers and the Zuni Indian rode on, mounting higher and higher along the mountain trail, heading for the summit. And when they reached it, and Bud, by a glance at his watch, announced that it was midnight, he followed with the suggestion that they camp there for the remainder of the night.

"We can make the rest of the trip in a couple of hours, for it's down hill," he said.

"Camp suits me," murmured Nort, and soon, after a bite to eat, they rolled themselves in their blankets, having tied the ponies to scrub bushes, and went to sleep. The riding of the boys, coupled with the pure air they had breathed, brought them slumber almost at once,

and even Buck Tooth, alert as he usually was, neither saw nor heard anything of the sinister visitor who came softly upon the sleeping ones during the night hours.

For there did come a visitor in the night, as evidenced by a scrawled warning, on a dirty piece of paper, fastened to a stubby tree by a long, sharp thorn.

It was this fluttering bit of paper that caught Dick's eye when he awakened, rather lame and stiff, and stretched himself in his blanket as the sun shone in his eyes next morning.

"Hello!" he cried, taking a hasty look around to see if Bud had, perchance, ridden away without awakening his companions, and had left this note to tell them so. "What's the idea?" and then Dick noticed that all three of his companions were stretched out near him, and the four ponies were standing together not far away.

"What idea?" asked Bud, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"That special delivery letter," and Dick pointed to it. "Wasn't here last night," he went on, "for I tied Blackie to that tree before I staked him out. What is it?"

Bud rolled out of his blanket, and took the piece of paper from the tree.

"It's a warning!" he announced.

"A warning?" cried Nort and Dick, while Buck Tooth began making a fire.

"Yes," went on the boy rancher. "Here's what it says:

"'Don't take no more watter frum Pocut River if you want to stay healthy!'"

"Whew!" whistled Dick. "What does that mean?"

"Just what I'd like to know," said Bud, and then all three boys started, and looked toward the upward slope of the mountain, down which they had partly descended. For there came rolling toward them a mass of dirt and stones, indicating the approach of some one.

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE REAPPEARANCE

CHARACTERISTIC it was of Bud Merkel, being a son of the west as he was, that his hand instinctively sought the leather holster whence protruded the grim, black handle of his .45. But he did not draw the weapon, nor did Nort or Dick pull theirs, which they had started to get out when they noted Bud's action.

For Bud smiled when he had a glimpse of the newcomer, and Buck Tooth, who had glanced up from where he was making the fire, gave a grunt of welcome.

"Babe!" exclaimed Nort, as he recognized the fat assistant foreman of Diamond X ranch. "Babe!"

"Sure! Who'd you think it was?" came the smiling question. "Looks like you had an idea it might be one of them rustlers that made trouble when you fellers was here before! Eh?

"Glad t' see you two *ex*-tenderfeet," and Babe Milton grinned broadly as he accented the

ex, and held out a welcoming hand to Nort and Dick. "They said you was comin' back to Diamond X, but I sorter missed you—been out tryin' t' locate a bunch of strays," he confided to Bud, "an' I didn't have no luck! Glad to meet yo' all, though, powerful glad! 'Specially on account of that there coffee!" and he sniffed the air as he caught the aroma of the fragrant pot Buck Tooth was putting on to boil.

"But what are you lads doing so far from Diamond X?" Babe went on, when they had moved over to the camp fire, the blaze of which was genially warm this cool morning on the mountain.

"We aren't stopping there this trip," said Nort.

"We're 'on our own,'" proceeded Bud. "I'm raising cattle in the old Buffalo Wallow Valley—Flume I call it now."

"Oh, yes, I did hear you were going to tackle that," spoke Babe. "Didn't know you'd got stocked up, though. Well, I've been over at Square M for so long I don't hear no real news no more. Gosh! But we did have some excitement the time those professor chaps pulled that *Trombone* out of the ground; didn't we, Bud?" he chuckled.

"Triceratops, Babe! Triceratops!" corrected Bud, laughing at the expression of the fat assistant foreman's face.

"I never could remember the name of them

musical pieces, nohow!" sighed Babe. "Fond as I am, too, of singing," and, taking a long breath, he bellowed forth on the unoffensive morning air this portion of a ballad:

> "Sing me to sleep with a spur for a rattle,
> Fill up the biscuits with lead.
> Coil me a rope 'round th' ole weepin' willow,
> Curl my feet under my head!"

"Glad you feel that way about it," remarked Bud, rather soberly, as they squatted around the fire for breakfast, which Buck Tooth seemed to have prepared in record time.

"What's bit you?" asked Babe, pausing with a smoking flapjack half way to his mouth, while in his other hand he held a steaming tin cup of coffee. "Git out th' wrong side of th' saddle this mornin'?"

"No, but there's trouble over at the valley," explained Bud. "The water has stopped running and——"

"The *water* stopped running!" interrupted Babe.

"Yes, and when we start out, intending to see what's the trouble, we get this warning," and Bud extended the dirty piece of paper that had been fastened to the tree with the thorn.

"Whew-ee-ee!" whistled Babe, as he read the scrawl of misspelled words. He opened his mouth again, to intone another of the hundred

or more verses of his favorite cowboy song, but Bud motioned to him to refrain.

"Don't you like my singin'?" asked Babe, a bit hurt.

"Yes, but I want to ask you some questions," went on Bud. "You say you've been out looking for strays?"

"Yep; prospectin' up and down Snake Mountain all yist'day an' part of th' night. My grub giv' out with supper last night, an' I was hopin' I might even run into a bunch of Greasers, when I saw you folks spreadin' th' banquet table here."

"Glad you joined us," remarked Nort.

"So'm I," mumbled Babe, his mouth full of bacon and flapjacks. "But what's your questions, Bud? Shoot!"

"Did you see anybody who might have written this?" and the boy rancher again read the sinister warning:

"'Don't take no more watter frum Pocut River if you want to stay healthy.'"

"Why, no, I didn't see nobody," spoke Babe, with more force than grammar. "'Tain't a joke; is it?"

"Not when I tell you the water has stopped running," said Bud.

"So you did! Hum, that's mighty queer like!" mused the assistant foreman, who had,

early in the spring, been transferred to Mr. Merkel's Square M ranch from Diamond X. "But some of us rather thought there'd be trouble when your paw dammed up the river to shunt some of it through the old water course over to Buffalo Wallow. Hank Fisher claims his water supply has been lessened by what your paw did, Bud."

"That's all bosh!" exclaimed Bud. "There's as much water for Hank Fisher as he ever had at Double Z. Besides, this isn't his way of doing business. He's as mean as they make 'em, but he'll come out in the open and tell you what he thinks of you."

"Yes, Hank is that way—*sometimes*," agreed Babe cautiously. "At th' same time I wouldn't put it past him. Better tell your paw about this, Bud. You got grit—all three of you!" and he included the other boys in his glance. "But you can't fight Hank Fisher, Del Pinzo and that onery gang of Greasers and Mexicans!"

"There!" cried Nort, clapping his hand down on his outstretched leg. "That's who that man was—Del Pinzo!"

"What man?" asked Babe.

"The one Bud shot."

"What's that?" cried Babe, half starting to his feet. "Did you shoot somebody?"

"Well, I may have *creased* him," admitted the boy, using a word to denote a grazing bullet wound, hardly more than a scratch.

"Whew-ee-ee!" whistled Babe again. "This sounds like old times! Let's have the hull yarn, Buddy!" he appealed.

Whereupon Bud related how he had ridden from his new ranch—Diamond X Second—to meet his cousins whom he expected. He told of finding the stream of water shut off, of the appearance of the man, the shot, his sudden vanishing, and the subsequent night ride of the boys.

"That was Del Pinzo, I'm sure of it!" declared Nort. "I was trying to think where I'd seen him before, and now I remember!"

"You couldn't very well forget Del Pinzo," declared Bud. "But this wasn't he. That isn't saying that it might not have been, of course," he added, "for I understand he broke jail, after they caught him and sent him up for rustling our cattle. No, this wasn't that slick Mexican, Nort."

"Who was it?" asked Babe, helping himself to another of the flapjacks which Buck was making in a skillet over the greasewood fire.

"That's what we don't know," said Bud. "He just naturally vanished, the way my water did. What are you going to do, Babe?"

"Well, I ought t' keep on lookin' for them strays your paw's so anxious about," was the answer. "But I reckon I got time t' mosey along with you. You say you're goin' down to the river?"

"Yes, to see if there's anything wrong at the intake pipe," Bud answered.

"Then I'll go with you," offered Babe. "And before you try that ride through the old water course, under the mountain, you'd better call up your paw."

"What for?" Bud wanted to know.

"Well, he mightn't altogether like it. There's a risk, an' he may want t' send some of us with you. It's easy t' get him on the 'phone from the dam."

"Yes," agreed Bud, "I s'pose I had better do that." He remembered that where Pocut River had been dammed to enable water to flow into the pipe line, and then through the old river course to his reservoir, there was a general store, which boasted of a telephone.

A little later, breakfast having been finished, the party, now including Babe, reached the Pocut River. There an inspection showed the water from the river above the dam running freely into the pipe that carried it to Flume Valley.

"Nothing wrong here," remarked Bud as he looked into the dark tunnel which received one end of the pipe. And it was through this natural tunnel, extending under the mountain, being the course of an old stream, that the boy ranchers proposed riding.

"No, th' trouble must be somewhere inside," agreed Babe. "But call up your paw, Bud."

Which Bud did, learning from his father at Diamond X, that Old Billee had departed, early that morning, to take up his abode at the camp in the valley.

"Better wait until Old Billee reaches your place, and then call him up," suggested Mr. Merkel to his son over the wire, for there was a 'phone in Bud's camp. It seemed rather an incongruity, but it was a great convenience, since it connected directly with Diamond X, Triangle B and Square M ranches, as well as with the regular lines.

There was nothing to do but wait until Old Billee might be expected to have reached the camp in Flume Valley, and after several hours Bud called up his own new ranch headquarters.

"They don't answer," Central reported.

"He's taking his time," commented Babe.

But an hour or so later, after several other trials, the voice of Old Billee came back over the wire from miles distant.

"Hello! Hello there! Wassa matter? Wassa matter?" demanded the voice of the old cowpuncher. "Where's everybody, anyhow? Nobody here but me!"

"We're over at the dam—Pocut River," called Bud into the instrument. "Say, Billee, something happened at my place last night. The water stopped, and we came over here to see where the stoppage was. But it's all right here. How about you there?"

"All serene here, Bud, all serene! Wait a minute and I'll take a look at your reservoir. I can see it from the tent where you got this talkin' contraption strung. You say the water stopped last night?"

"Stopped complete, Billee," Bud answered back over the wire.

"Well then, if there's any comin' over the spillway, now, it's a sign she's runnin' here ag'in, I take it!"

"Sure thing. But is she running?" asked Bud, anxiously.

"Wait a minute, an' I'll take a look. Hold on to that there wire!"

"I'll hold it!" promised Bud, smiling at his cousins.

There was a moment of anxious waiting and, in fancy, the boy ranchers could see Old Billee going to the tent flap and looking toward the reservoir.

"Hello, Bud!" presently came the call over the wire.

"Hello, Billee. What about it?"

"Water's there all right! Must 'a' come back in th' night! She's runnin' fine now!"

CHAPTER V

ANOTHER WARNING

BUD MERKEL was about to hang up the receiver, with a blank and uncomprehending look on his face, when Babe caught the black rubber earpiece from him.

"Wait a minute, Billee!" called Babe into the transmitter. "See anything of anybody around there? Anything suspicious?"

The others could not hear what the old cowboy's answer was, but Babe soon enlightened them.

"He says it's all serene," Babe declared as he now hung up the receiver. "Nobody in sight, an' the water is runnin' through the pipe as natural as can be."

"I can't understand it!" declared Bud. "It was almost as dry as a bone when we left last night."

"But it's running in here from the river dam," said Nort.

"Then there must have been a break somewhere in the tunnel natural water course," declared Bud. "Well, if it mended itself so much

the better. But that doesn't explain this," and he held out the scrawled warning. "And if the water stopped once it may stop again."

"Yes," agreed Babe, "but if anybody wanted to stop it they'd have to do it either at this end, where the pipe takes water from the river, or at your end, Bud, where it delivers water to your reservoir."

"Unless somebody stopped the stream inside the tunnel," suggested Dick.

"Then it would back up here at the river end," said Nort, quickly, "and it hasn't done that."

"No, it hasn't," agreed Bud. "It sure is queer. I'm beginning to think there may be more in that black rabbit than I believed first."

"What rabbit is that?" asked Babe.

"The one Old Billee said would bring me bad luck," Bud answered. "Well," he went on to his cousins, "we might as well go back to camp. We can't do anything here."

"If you've got water that's all you want in Flume Valley," declared Babe. "There isn't a finer place t' raise cattle in all th' world than there—if you have *water!*"

"And if you haven't—you might as well quit!" spoke Bud.

"You eliminated an earful that time," the assistant foreman stated. "But I reckon it was just a little break, inside th' tunnel, an' it filled

itself up natural like. You won't have any more trouble."

"I hope not," spoke the boy rancher. "Are you going on back to Diamond X, Babe?"

"Not until I find that bunch of strays from Square M. They're too valuable t' let slip."

"Especially to let Hank Fisher, or Del Pinzo, slip them away," exclaimed Bud as he and his chums left the store where they had been telephoning.

"Not so loud! Not so loud!" cautioned Babe.

"Why not?" Bud wanted to know, when they were outside.

" 'Cause one of Hank's men was in there! He'll be sure t' tell what you said, Bud."

"Let him! I'm not afraid of Hank, or his tool Del Pinzo, and I'd just as soon either one would know what I think of 'em!"

"Don't be too brash; don't be too brash!" counseled Babe. "But they sure are both bad actors—Del an' Hank!"

There was nothing more that needed to, or could, be done at the Pocut River end of the flume, part natural, part artificial, which supplied Bud's new ranch with such a vital necessity as water. The stream had been dammed just above the intake pipe—not completely dammed, but enough to provide the necessary head of water.

As Nort had said, had the stream been stopped purposely or by accident inside the

tunnel, the water would have backed up and run out around the pipe, flowing into the river below the dam. But this had not occurred.

"If it doesn't happen again we'll be all right," spoke Bud, as he rode back with his cousins, making an easy pace along the trail that led over Snake Mountain and down into Flume Valley. "But if the water stops running again——"

"Let's go through the tunnel; it's the only way to be sure!" interrupted Nort.

"I'm with you!" exclaimed Dick.

"It would seem to be the only way," agreed Bud. "Well, we'll hope this is the end of my black-rabbit bad luck, and look for success, now that you fellows are here. Cracky! But we'll have some good times, and there'll be plenty of work, too!"

"How many cattle you got?" asked Nort.

"About five hundred," Bud answered. "Course you have a share with me, that your dad bought, but we don't own 'em outright yet. My dad still has a mortgage on 'em."

"But if we have luck we can clear that off; can't we?" asked Dick.

"Sure, this year, maybe," assented Bud. "I never saw steers fatten so fast as ours have since I brought 'em to Flume Valley. I reckon the land, being without water so long, raises a specially fine kind of grass. Of course, there's always some at the far end of the valley, good

grass, too, but when there wasn't any water for the cattle to drink there wasn't any use trying to raise stock there. But now it's different."

"And all we want is for the water to stay," added Dick.

"That's all," chimed in his brother.

With Buck Tooth trailing behind, the three boys took the mountain trail and reached their camp near the reservoir that evening. They found Old Billee and Yellin' Kid waiting for them, these two cowboys having been assigned by Mr. Merkel to help his son in the lad's new venture.

"Well, yo' got back, I see," remarked Old Billee as he greeted the lads, the Indian going off by himself, for he was rather taciturn in his manner.

"Yes, we're here," admitted Bud. "But I I can't understand that water coming back so unexpectedly."

"Are you sure it stopped running?" asked Yellin' Kid in his usual loud voice.

"Sure!" declared Bud. "Didn't Buck see it—or, rather, he didn't see it, for there wasn't any water to see coming through the pipe—only a few drops."

"I wouldn't take his word," declared Old Billee. "Not that Buck would actually lie, but those Indians are queer."

"Oh, we all saw that the water wasn't running," declared Nort.

"Well, it was when I got here," stated the old cowboy. "And there wasn't a sign of anything wrong. But if there had been I'd expected it, 'count of——"

"That black rabbit, I reckon!" broke in Bud.

"Perzactly!" declared Old Billee. "A black jack shore is bad luck, at any stage of th' game!"

But for a time there seemed to be no truth in this western omen. Following the first mysterious disappearance of the water, and its equally strange reappearance, peace seemed to settle down over Flume Valley.

The steers and yearlings, with which Bud's father had entrusted him and the boy ranchers, thrived and fattened on the succulent grass. Old Billee, Yellin' Kid, with Buck Tooth's help, aided the boys in such minor duties as were necessary to perform about the camp. The main duty was looking after the safety of the cattle, to see that none of them strayed beyond the wire fence at the far end of the valley. Should any stray from the other egress, nearest Diamond X ranch, no great harm would result, as they would still be on their owner's land.

But the farther, or north end, adjoined land owned by Hank Fisher, the Double Z representative. And there were ugly stories current concerning Mr. Fisher.

But as the days passed, and as the water still flowed through the pipes and underground tunnel into the reservoir, Bud and his companions began to think they had imagined more troubles than were really to occur.

"Guess that warning was only a bluff," said Bud, one day.

"And the black rabbit doesn't seem to have given you the jinx," added Nort.

"But we didn't find that man you shot," put in Dick.

"I don't believe I shot him," declared Bud. "There was blood, sure enough, but he may have stumbled, as, in fact, we saw him, and scratched himself."

"But where did he disappear to?" asked Nort.

"Give up," answered Bud. "We'll have to take another look after we get our first shipment out of the way."

For the first bunch of steers from the Flume Valley camp were to be disposed of shortly.

It was the day when this shipment was to be made that Bud, awakening early in the tent where he slept with his cousins, uttered an exclamation of surprise as he caught sight of something on the blanket that covered him.

"What's the matter?" asked Dick, sitting up.

"Did you leave this here?" asked Bud, as he held up a piece of board, evidently part of a packing case.

"Me? No!" answered Dick. "What is it?"

"Either it's a joke, or it's the black rabbit getting in his work," answered Bud. "It's from an unknown enemy—another warning!"

And, as Bud held up the board, Nort and Dick could read, scrawled on it, evidently with a fire-blackened stick, the words:

"Warning No. 2. When will you quit?"

CHAPTER VI

TROUBLE AT SQUARE M

"GUESS that must be a joke," decided Nort, as he stepped gingerly from his cot, for it was cold in the mornings, though hot enough at midday. "Likely Old Billee or Yellin' Kid stuck it there," added the eastern lad, as he looked at the scrawled warning.

"Old Billee wouldn't do it," declared Bud. "He's gotten over his joking days. But it might have been Yellin' Kid."

"Sure!" agreed Dick. "Probably he did it to make what Billee said about the black rabbit come true—to sort of scare you, Bud."

"Well, of course that *might* have happened," admitted the western lad, but from the tone of his voice, as he made a hasty toilet, his cousins could tell he was far from being convinced.

"You don't reckon it could be Buck Tooth, do you?" asked Dick, following his cousin's example in attiring himself for the day's work.

"What? That Zuni Indian? I should say not! His idea of a joke would make your hair stand on end—or it would in his wild and

younger days. Now all he cares about, after he gets through riding herd, is to sit in the sun and smoke his Mexican cigarettes. Buck Tooth doesn't joke."

"Well, maybe it was Yellin' Kid," suggested Nort.

But when, a little later, they assembled in the meal tent, to partake of breakfast, and Bud produced the scrawled board, Yellin' Kid was the first to shake his head at the implied question.

"I like fun!" he remarked in his loud, good-natured voice, "but I don't play such jokes as this. My idea of fun would be to help dig up another one of them queer, slidin'-trombone insects with the three horns that the professor fellers discovered. But this—why, Bud, this may be serious business!"

"That black rabbit—I told you!" croaked Old Billee.

"Do you really think it means anything?" asked the boy rancher, while his young partners in the new venture leaned eagerly forward to listen to the answer.

"I sure do," declared Yellin' Kid. "All of us have known, Bud, an' your father among 'em, that puttin' a dam in Pocut River, an' taking water for you here, at Flume Valley, made the Double Z outfit mad enough t' rear up on their hind legs an' howl! Hank Fisher has claimed, all along, that th' Diamond X outfit

hadn't any right t' take water from th' river, t' shunt over on th' other side of Snake Mountain, where we are, here."

"Yes, I heard dad say that," spoke Bud. "But if Hank Fisher had any rights that we violated, why didn't he go to law about it?"

"That isn't Hank's way," commented Yellin' Kid. "He'd more likely try some such tricks as *that,*" and the cowboy nodded toward the warning on the board.

"Do you think he left that?" asked Nort.

"And was he, or Del Pinzo, in our camp last night?" cried Dick.

"As to that I couldn't say," replied Yellin' Kid. "I slept like two tops last night, after I got t' sleep. I didn't even hear you fellows *snore,*" he added, for the three boy ranchers had a tent to themselves, while Old Billee and Yellin' Kid bunked in an adjoining one, Buck Tooth having his own special dugout near the camp fire.

"We never snore!" declared Nort.

"Well, I didn't hear a sound!" assented Yellin' Kid.

"Nor I," said Old Billee.

There was no use asking Buck Tooth. An actual demonstration would have been required to make him understand what a "snore" was, and then he might have misinterpreted it into an attempt to work some "magic" on him.

"Well, somebody came in our camp, and left

that board—there's no getting away from the fact," declared Bud, as he put aside the ominous warning. "And it may have some connection with the stoppage of the water, or it may not."

"I'm inclined t' think it has," said Yellin' Kid. "An', what's more, Bud, I think we'll wake up again, some mornin', t' find that reservoir of yours out-a business."

"Do you mean Hank Fisher, or Del Pinzo and his crowd, will blow it up?" asked Bud anxiously.

"Not exactly that, but they'll cut off your water supply."

"But how can they?" asked Bud. "They can't do anything to the pipe intake at Pocut River without being seen, and dad had legal advice to the effect that he has as good right to that river water as Double Z, or any other ranch. And as for this end of the pipe here, we can look after that, I reckon," and he significantly tapped his .45 which he had strapped on, preparatory to getting ready for the cattle shipment.

"That's all right," asserted Yellin' Kid. "But you've forgotten th' big tunnel under the mountain, Bud, where the water runs free after it leaves the river pipe, an' before it gets to the pipe here."

"But Hank, or Del Pinzo, can't cut off the water inside the mountain tunnel without hav-

ing it back up and run into the river again—and it didn't do that!" Bud insisted.

Yellin' Kid shrugged his shoulders, as he started for the corral to get his horse, since he was to aid in driving the cattle to the railroad stock yard.

"I don't know nothin' about th' scientific end of it," he drawled loudly, "but, mark my words, there's some queer business goin' on, an' Hank Fisher an' Del Pinzo have a hand in it. Look out for your water supply, Bud; that's my advice!"

"An' don't let any more black rabbits cross your path," added Old Billee.

"Bunk!" scoffed Bud. "Though I don't like this warning, all the same. Let's go take a look at the reservoir, fellows."

But an inspection of the concrete water-container showed nothing wrong there. The sparkling fluid, so necessary for the cattle, and so vital to Diamond X Second, was spurting from the pipe freely.

"Guess they're only trying to bluff us!" was Dick's opinion.

"Maybe," assented his cousin. "But, all the same, I'd like to know who was in our camp last night. If this thing is going to keep up we'll have to mount guard."

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," declared Nort. "I don't like to go to bed so early, anyhow."

"You'll be glad enough to turn in after we get into the swing of things here, branding cattle, shipping 'em off and all that," said Bud. "But let's take a look around after we get this bunch off."

And when Yellin' Kid, with another cowboy sent by Mr. Merkel to help Bud in getting the steers to the railroad station, had departed with the shipment, the boy ranchers, Old Billee and Buck Tooth made a careful examination in the vicinity of the tents.

Of course, with so many who really belonged in the camp, tramping around it, there was little likelihood of an alien foot being discovered. Nevertheless, Bud hoped for something of this sort. But it was not to be. No trace of the midnight intruder, who had left the ominous warning, was discovered. And yet he had come and gone—had even penetrated to the tent where the boys were sleeping.

"It's either bluff, or it means something," declared Bud, as they assembled for lunch "And if it isn't bluff, but a *fight,* Hank Fisher and Del Pinzo will find we can stick to our guns as well as they!"

"You said it!" cried Nort.

"Del Pinzo didn't stay long in jail; did he?" asked Dick, for, following the discovery of the Triceratops and the capture of the cattle rustlers, as detailed in the first volume, the Mexican halfbreed had been arrested.

"No, he managed to get out, and, by some hook or crook, he still manages to escape arrest," Bud answered.

For some time it appeared that the two warnings were only "bluffs." No sign came from the unknown, and no trace was seen of Hank Fisher, Del Pinzo or any of the unprincipled gang which had made so much trouble the previous year for the Diamond X outfit.

Nor did the water coming under Snake Mountain show any signs of giving out. Day after day it ran its limpid stream, furnishing drink for man and beast, and enabling grass to grow where it had never grown before.

"Some day I'm going to rig up a turbine wheel and attach a dynamo to it, so we can have electric light here," declared Bud.

"That'll be great!" exclaimed Dick.

The first shipment of cattle had been safely gotten off from Flume Valley, and brought a good price. This money did not all come to the boy ranchers, however, as Mr. Merkel had insisted on a strict business deal; and he was to be paid for his share of the stock he supplied Bud from the first money coming in. Later the boys would get their profits—if there were any.

But the first lot of steers had been sent away, bringing a higher price than usual because of their prime condition, attributed, so Bud said, to the finer quality of grass, and it looked as

if the boy ranchers might make a success of their first venture.

"Even discounting the black rabbit and the warnings out of the air," said Bud.

It was, then, with somewhat of an ominous feeling that, one morning, as the boys and their cowboy friends were at breakfast, they saw a rider hastening toward them along the trail that led from Diamond X.

"It's Snake Purdee!" exclaimed Yellin' Kid, when the rider had approached near enough to be recognized.

"An' he's ridin' like he had suthin' on his mind!" added Old Billee. "I hope that black rabbit——" he murmured, and then his voice trailed off into a whisper as Yellin' Kid surreptitiously kicked him under the packing-box table.

"Don't scare th' boys!" whispered Yellin' Kid in explanation, as Snake Purdee galloped nearer.

The rider flung himself from his pony, which came to a sliding stop near the camp tents, and, looking first at the boy ranchers, and then at the big, peaceful valley stretching out before him, remarked:

"Yes, there's plenty of room here!"

"For what?" asked Bud.

"More cattle!" answered Snake Purdee. "There's been trouble over at Square M, fellows!"

"Trouble?" exclaimed the boy ranchers in chorus. "What kind?"

"Bad trouble," was the reply. "Call your father up on th' 'phone, Bud," he added. "He wants t' talk t' you. Yes," he went on, musingly, as Bud hastened in to the telephone, "there's bad trouble at Square M!"

CHAPTER VII

DOUBLING UP

NORT and Dick looked at each other as Bud slipped into the tent where the telephone had been installed. Snake Purdee strode over to the water pail, and took a long drink.

"That's good stuff!" he remarked with a sigh of satisfaction, and then he led his pony to the trough, into which the thirsty animal dipped his muzzle deeply. "Mighty good water!"

"An' I hope nothing happens to it," voiced Old Billee.

"Happens! What d'yo' mean?" questioned the bearer of bad tidings. "The water's here, ain't it?"

"But no tellin' how long it'll run," added the veteran cowpuncher. "A black rabbit run across Bud's path the day he was ridin' to meet Nort and Dick, and ever since then——"

"Do you mean t' tell me you still believe in that old superstition?" laughed Snake Purdee, who had acquired this name because of his exceeding fear of rattlers and other reptiles. He

had been bitten once, he declared, and had nearly died.

"There's more'n superstition!"[2] declared Old Billee. "Look at that!" and he brought out the board warning, and related the incident of the mysterious disappearance of the water, and its equally strange reappearance.

"Oh, it's just one of those freaks of the old, underground river course," said Snake. "Of course I wouldn't put much past Hank Fisher and Del Pinzo, but if either of them sent these warnings it was t' play a joke, an' scare our boy ranchers. Guess Hank's jealous!" laughed Snake.

"But what has happened over at Square M?" asked Dick.

"Has Hank or Del Pinzo anything to do with that?" Nort wanted to know.

"I don't see how they could," spoke Snake. "It's just that——"

But at this moment Bud came out of the tent, having finished his telephonic talk with his father.

"There's an epidemic of disease at dad's Square M ranch," Bud explained to his cousins and the others. "It's so bad that a lot of the steers have already died, and dad is going to take off the rest of the stock before they catch the trouble. Some he's going to put at Triangle B, some at Diamond X and some he's going to haze over to us. We'll have to double up, fel-

lows," he told Nort and Dick. "I guess dad is glad he's got Flume Valley now. It may save him a lot of money that otherwise he'd lose."

"Got t' double up, eh?" murmured Old Billee Dobb. "How many head's he goin' t' send here, Bud?"

"About five hundred he told me. They'll be stock that hasn't been near the infected cattle," he went on, "so there won't be any danger to our herds."

"Can we look after five hundred more steers?" asked Nort.

"Oh, I'm comin' to help you," offered Snake. "I forgot t' say that I was going t' move into one of your *flats,*" and he waved his hand toward where the white tents made an attractive camp. "Didn't bring my duffle bag," he added, "but one of th' boys is going t' ride over this evening with his 'n' mine."

"Is some one else coming?" Bud wanted to know. "If we double up too much we'll need more grub."

"Your dad told me t' tell you he'd send some," went on Snake. "Yep, a new ranch hand is due t' arrive this evenin'. He's a wonder with th' gun an' rope, t' hear him tell it!" chuckled Snake.

"One of them fly boys?" asked Old Billee, mildly, with a gleam of light in his eyes, however. "Will his heels need clippin', Snake?"

"Might," was the brief answer. "But now

you know th' worst. There's trouble at Square M, an' you'll have to double up with cow punchers an' stock, Bud."

"I don't mind," said the boy rancher. "Dad says he'll split the profits with me, and that's what we're looking for—to make a success of Flume Valley ranch. We'll do it, too!" he asserted confidently.

"If th' water holds out, an' no more black rabbits don't throw you," murmured Old Billee Dobb.

"Shucks!" laughed Bud, but the day was to come when he recalled the old cowboy's ominous warning.

"It's queer, though," said Bud that evening, when they were gathered around the camp fire, discussing the coming of the cattle from Square M, which were to arrive the following day, or the one after that. "It's queer what made that disease break out so suddenly among dad's steers. There aren't any cases of it at Double Z; are there?" he asked Snake. "And Fisher's place is the next one nearest ours."

"No, I don't recall hearin' that Hank's stock is sufferin' any," the cowboy admitted. "But Square M is hard hit. It's a disease the government experts are tryin' t' find a remedy for. Been experimentin' with all sorts of serums, germs an' th' like, I understand."

"Is it a germ disease?" asked Nort.

"That's what they call it," the cowboy as-

serted. "It can be given easy, from one steer to another, just by rubbin' horns, so t' speak. Or the trouble may break out sudden in a herd, if th' germ gets loose in 'em."

"That's all bosh!" declared Pocut Pete, the new cowboy who had arrived just about grub time, with his own outfit and that of Snake Purdee, who had ridden over "light."

"What's bosh?" asked Old Billee.

"The idea that this disease is spread by germs, or 'bugs,' as some folks call 'em. I think the cattle get poisoned by eating some weed, same as lots of 'em get locoed."

"Well, maybe," agreed Bud. "Anyhow, we got good feed here, and plenty of water for dad's cattle, as well as ours. We can double up as well as not. Now I wonder if we have blankets enough for you two?" and he looked at Snake and Pocut, who said his name had been given him as he had "punched" cows so long in the vicinity of the Pocut River.

"Oh, we'll make out," asserted Snake, who was easily suited.

But Bud, being the nominal head of the camp, would leave nothing to chance. While some of the others were still about the flickering camp fire, talking of the trouble at Square M, the strange disappearance of the water and kindred topics, the boy rancher went to inspect the tent where the older cowboys were to pass the night. It was fitted with cots enough, and one to

spare, but Bud wanted to make sure of the blankets. For it gets cold at night on the western plains on even very hot days.

As Bud entered the tent he saw, in the dim light of a turned-down lantern, a figure sitting on one of the cots.

"That you, Snake?" Bud asked.

"No, it's me," answered the voice of the new cowboy, Pocut Pete.

"Oh," remarked the lad, and as the other arose Bud caught the tinkle of glass. For a moment an ugly suspicion entered Bud's mind, but when his nostrils did not catch the smell of liquor, which was strictly forbidden on all Mr. Merkel's ranches, Bud felt a sense of relief.

Pocut Pete passed out, after Bud had assured himself that there were blankets enough, and as the boy rancher was leaving the tent, he trod on something that broke, with a grating sound, under his foot.

CHAPTER VIII

DRY AGAIN

"WHAT the mischief's that?" exclaimed Bud, as he unhooked the lantern from the tent pole and swung it toward the ground where he had set his foot. "Has Nort or Dick lost their bottle of paregoric?" and he chuckled as he recalled what use his cousins had made of that baby-pacifier when they had been captured at the camp of the professors, as related in the book prior to this.

"It *is* a bottle, and I stepped on it and smashed it," went on Bud, as he saw the shining particles of thin glass. "That new cowboy, Pocut Pete, must have dropped it. Hope it wasn't any medicine he needed. Smells mighty queer, though!" and Bud sniffed the air. "I hope he isn't one of those 'dope fiends,'" and again a feeling of apprehension passed over him.

Bud picked up one of the largest pieces of the crushed glass bottle. The little phial appeared to have been filled with a sticky, yellowish substance, and the odor was not pleasant.

"Whew!" exclaimed Bud as he caught a strong whiff of it. "I wouldn't want to have to take any of *that* for medicine. Guess I'll ask Snake what he knows of Pocut Pete before I make any inquiries on my own hook. And I'll tell him he'd better bury this glass if he doesn't want to cut his own feet, or that of the others."

"Bunks all right?" asked Old Billee Dobb, as Bud emerged from the tent.

"All ready to turn in," was the answer.

"Which I'm going to do dark an' early," declared the old cowboy. "I have the late watch t'-night."

For it had been decided, with the coming of the additional steers from Square M, that it would be necessary to ride herd, as so many cattle in a bunch might engender a stampede. And at Old Billee's suggestion the night-riding was to start then, to break them in, so to speak.

Bud saw Pocut Pete standing by himself at the cook tent, Buck Tooth having been induced to open some cans of peaches, a form of fruit much in favor on western ranches where the fresh variety is unobtainable.

"You'd better clean up that glass you left in the bunk tent," Bud remarked in a low voice.

"What glass?" sharply demanded the other, and there was in his voice a note of defiance, the boy thought.

"The glass bottle you dropped, and I stepped

on," Bud resumed, for he did not hesitate to give orders in his own camp.

"I didn't drop any bottle!" declared Pocut Pete.

"Well, some one did, and I smashed it," asserted Bud. "If you don't want to cut your feet you'd better bury it," and he hurried off to wash from his hands some of the unpleasant-smelling mixture that had clung to them.

"I sleep with my boots on," said Pocut Pete. "But I'll tell the rest of 'em to be careful."

"It would be better," Bud flung back over his shoulder.

It was late next day when cowboys from Square M arrived, slowly driving before them the cattle that were to be doubled up with those which Bud, Nort and Dick considered specially their own.

"What's the situation over there now?" Bud asked one of the punchers, who looked tired and weary, for the trail had been long and dry, as evidenced by the eager manner in which the steers rushed for water.

"Pretty bad," was the answer. "This disease, whatever it is, seems to kill off mighty quick. I don't know how many your dad has lost, but I guess now, what with those we've brought here and them sent to Diamond X and Triangle B, that we'll get the best of the trouble. Gosh! You got a nice place here!" he added admiringly.

"Yes, it's pretty good," Bud agreed. "Bringing the water over from Pocut River made all the difference in the world."

"You got out a lungful that time!" asserted another of the cowboys who had helped "haze" over the steers that were transferred to save them from infection.

The visiting cowboys departed next day, leaving their animals mingled with those in which Bud, Nort and Dick had an interest. The doubled-up herd was not too large but what there was plenty of feed and water in Flume Valley.

During the days that followed, matters at Diamond X Second, as Bud sometimes called his ranch camp, adjusted themselves smoothly. There was no further sign, or evidence, of mysterious warnings. The cattle throve, and those from Square M, which were not in as good physical condition as the animals that had been longer in the green valley, began to "pick up" and fatten.

"I tell you what, fellows!" boasted Bud to his cousins, "dad'll be wishing he'd kept this ranch for himself! We'll beat him at his own game!"

"It would be a big stunt if we could, not taking advantage of his bad luck at Square M, though," spoke Nort.

"Well, you have to count on bad luck in this business," remarked Bud. "Not that black

rabbits have anything to do with it," he laughed, as he looked at Old Billee.

Bud and his cousins were returning, one hot afternoon, from having ridden to a distant part of the valley, where Snake Purdee had reported he had found a calf killed. There was a suspicion that rustlers had been at work, but Bud decided the animal had been separated from its mother and the main herd, and had been pulled down by coyotes.

"What's that?" asked Nort, when they were within sight of the camp with its reservoir in the background.

"What's what?" asked Bud, who pulled his pony aside quickly, to escape a prairie dog's burrow.

"Looks like Old Billee waving his hat for us to hit up the pace," spoke Dick.

"It is!" asserted Bud, after gazing beneath his hands held in front of his eyes as a sunshield. "I hope nothing's wrong!"

But when they had ridden up, the old cowboy riding out to meet them, it was made plain, in a moment, that something had occurred out of the ordinary.

Old Billee Dobb was much excited. His eyes blazed and snapped and he shook the reins in addition to mildly spurring on his pony.

"More mysterious warnings?" asked Bud.

"Worse'n that," was the answer. "She's dry ag'in!"

"The pipe line?" asked Dick.

"You hit it!" cried the other. "Water's stopped runnin' ag'in, Bud!"

"Whew!" whistled the boy rancher. "And with a double lot of stock on hand, too! This is bad!"

CHAPTER IX

A SHOT IN THE NIGHT

WHEELING his pony, Old Billee rode back with the boy ranchers, until they reached the bottom of the reservoir wall. Then, dismounting, Bud, Nort and Dick scrambled up the earth slope on one side until they could look into the storage tank, and at the pipe which, connecting with the old underground water-course, kept the reservoir filled.

"She isn't spouting!" said Bud, in blank disappointment.

"Just a dribble," added Nort, mournfully.

"And if it does as it did before that'll stop in a little while," remarked Dick.

"When did it start to stop?" asked Bud, unconscious of the double meaning of his words.

"About an hour ago," Old Billee answered. "I happened t' notice it when I come up here t' try for a fish."

"Fish!" cried Nort. "Can you get any fish *here*?"

"Sartin sure!" asserted the old cowboy. "They come in from th' river, under th' moun-

tain, though how they like the dark I can't say, an' they come out of this pipe. I've caught many a good one."

The eastern lads looked to Bud for confirmation, and their cousin nodded, rather gloomily, though.

"Yes," said Bud, "fish do come through the pipe. But if we don't get any more water they'll all die off soon."

"Maybe the water will come back—as it did before," asserted Dick.

Bud did not answer. He appeared to be figuring out something on the back of an old envelope with the stub of a pencil.

"We'll have enough for a week, I think," finally announced the boy rancher. "Then, if the water doesn't come back, we'll have to drive all the stock over to Diamond X. Can't take a chance letting 'em die of thirst here, even if they didn't stampede, which they'd be sure to do."

Two things are vitally necessary on a ranch —grass and water for the stock. Of grass there was plenty in Flume Valley, and, had the stream continued to come through the pipe, there would have been a goodly supply of water, even for the extra stock added from Square M.

But when no fluid spurted from the mouth of the black pipe, the other end being hidden in the opening of the natural water course, it spelled ruin for Diamond X Second.

"I wonder—I just wonder—if this has anything to do with the threat we received?" mused Bud, as he and his cousins went down the slope to the little table of land where the tents were pitched.

"Granting that it has, who sent the warning?" asked Nort.

"Who else but the man who doesn't want to see any water diverted from Pocut River?" asked Bud, in turn. "I mean Hank Fisher, and the gang he trails along with! If anyone stopped this water, he did!"

"But how?" asked Yellin' Kid, who had strolled up to take part in the general conversation. "He couldn't do it at th' river end of th' pipe, without bein' found out, and he hasn't been around *here,* I'll gamble on that—not since we started keepin' watch at night."

"No, he hasn't been here," admitted Bud, slowly. "It sure is a puzzle. Well, let's have grub, and talk about it later. It may come back. If it doesn't we have enough for a week—maybe longer."

It was drinking water for the cattle that was mostly needed, since the occasional, slight rainfall was now sufficient to provide for the grass, though some water was used to irrigate certain sections that would be called "meadows" in the east. This drinking water was conducted to distant troughs by pipes running from the

reservoir, the pipes being controlled by means of valves, or water gates.

Had there been natural water-holes in Flume Valley it would, long ago, have been used as a place to raise cattle. But it was the absence of drinking places that caused it to be passed by, until, by artificial means, tapping the river through the underground course, Mr. Merkel had enabled his son and nephews to become boy ranchers in earnest.

As Bud had stated, there was about a week's supply on reserve in the concrete reservoir. When that was exhausted, unless the water again started flowing through the pipe, the cattle would suffer from thirst.

"Well, she isn't spouting any," mournfully remarked Nort, as, with his brother and Bud, he ascended the slope, standing on the edge of the reservoir.

"No," agreed Bud. "She's as dry as an old buffalo skull now. I don't know what to do!"

The shadows of dusk were falling, and the boys felt that the night was coming with its gloom to match their own feelings. Failure seemed to stare them in the face.

"But I don't see how anyone—granting that somebody like Hank Fisher or Del Pinzo has it in for us—can shut off the water without operating at either end of the flume!" exclaimed Nort.

"That is queer," agreed Bud. "I wonder

what's inside that tunnel where the old water-course runs? I've been through it, but couldn't see much of anything. I've a good notion——"

He broke off his remarks to gaze intently ahead. There was a movement in the gloom, and a figure walked away.

"Who's there?" asked Bud sharply, his hand slipping to his .45.

"It's me," came quickly, if not grammatically, from Pocut Pete, whose voice the boys recognized. "I just moseyed up here t' see if she was runnin'."

"Well, she isn't," spoke Bud, a bit shortly.

"So I see," came the drawling answer, and it was followed by a faint tinkling of glass.

Bud started, and tried to pierce the night shadows. But all he saw was the figure of the strange cowboy becoming more and more indistinct. Bud was just going to say something when he was halted by the voice of Nort.

"I have an idea!" exclaimed 'he eastern lad.

"What is it?" asked his brother. "Anything to do with this?" and he waved toward the reservoir which was strangely still, now that the water no longer bubbled into it from the pipe.

"Yes," went on Nort. "Why not investigate and see where the stoppage is, Bud?"

"Investigate what?"

"The pipe line—the old underground water-course."

"You mean go through the tunnel?" Bud asked.

"Sure! Why not? You say it's big enough all the way through, and the water itself doesn't occupy much of the bottom. We could walk it in a day, easy!"

"Yes," agreed Bud, "it isn't more than five miles, though we'd have to carry lanterns, and we might get lost in some side passage."

"That's just what I want to find out about!" cried Nort. "If there *is* a branch passage maybe that's where the water goes! Come on, Bud, let's go through the tunnel!"

"I'm with you!" said Dick.

For a moment Bud hesitated and then, as he was about to reply, there came the sudden sound of a shot, which shattered the night with a sliver of flame, plainly visible to the boys.

Instantly a band of coyotes set up their weird howling, and the startled steers lowed and bellowed as they rushed about.

CHAPTER X

INTO THE TUNNEL

"WHAT'S that?" cried Bud.

"Who's there?" demanded Nort.

The hand of Dick went toward the .45 he wore in a holster at his belt, and, it might be added, the hands of the others did also.

"Keep your shirts on," came the somewhat drawling voice of Pocut Pete, who, it seemed, had returned after shuffling off in the darkness. "I just winged a coyote."

"Oh," murmured Bud. "You were shooting at them, were you?" he asked.

"Not exactly," answered Pocut Pete, as he sauntered up out of the gloom. "I saw something movin' down among th' cattle, an' I knew it couldn't be any of you fellows, so I let go at him."

"*Him!*" cried Nort. "Was it a man?"

"Looked like one," drawled Pete. "I heard you'd had trouble with rustlers before I came, so I wasn't takin' any chances. I didn't aim t' hit him, though, only t' scare him, an' I must have winged one of them night-owls!" He

chuckled at this characterization of the coyotes.

"Let's take a look down there," suggested Bud to his cousins, their worried interest in the stoppage of the water momentarily eclipsed by the new excitement.

"Oh, you won't find anyone down there *now!*" Pocut Pete made haste to say. "If it was a rustler he's far enough off by *this* time, an' I'm not positive I really saw one—it was so dark."

"It won't do any harm to take a look," declared Bud, and his cousins were of the same opinion.

"Suit yourself," spoke Pete, easily. "If I did hit him let me know."

Again he moved off in the darkness, and the boy ranchers, after a moment of hesitation, started in the direction whence the shot had been heard and the sliver of flame seen. Pocut Pete had gone on the opposite trail after returning to the boys, a fact which caused Dick to remark:

"Wouldn't you think he'd want to see if he did wing anybody?"

"He knows well enough he didn't," declared Bud in a low voice, for he and the others realized that sounds, especially voices, carried almost as clearly in the night air as across a body of water.

"What made him talk that way then?" asked Nort.

"Oh, he's—queer, I guess," replied Bud. "I don't exactly just like the way he acts. Did you fellows hear the tinkle of glass just before that shot?"

"I did," answered Nort, but Dick was not so sure. "What do you make of it?" Nort wanted to know.

"Wish I knew," spoke Bud, and then he told them about having found the small, thin, broken phial of dubious-smelling mixture in the bunk tent of the older cowboys.

"Do you think he takes 'dope,' or medicine of some sort?" asked Dick.

"It's hard to say," was Bud's reply. "But let's look around and see what we can find."

Their search was unrewarded, however. The cattle quieted down after the shot, and the coyotes only occasionally gave vent to their blood-curdling yells. But as for finding anyone who had been shot—including even a miserable coyote—there was not a sign.

"Guess Pete didn't wing anybody after all," mused Dick, as he and his chums turned back toward the camp.

"I never s'posed he did," grunted Bud. "He's a four-flusher, that fellow is, in my opinion. I wish dad had sent me somebody else."

"He's a good cowboy," defended Nort.

"Yes, but I don't feel that I can trust him. I'd rather have one like Old Billee, slow as he is, than two Pocut Pete chaps," grumbled the

boy rancher. "But we've got other worries besides him, fellows! What are we going to do for water, now that we have a double supply of cattle at our ranch? That's what's worrying me!"

"It's enough to worry anyone," Dick agreed. "Maybe the water will come back, Bud."

"I hope it does," added Nort.

"We'll take a stroll through that tunnel—it's the only way to find out what's wrong," decided Bud. "Talk about black rabbits! I begin to think Old Billee was more right than wrong!"

"But your bad luck, so far, isn't as bad as your father's in losing cattle from disease," remarked Nort.

"No, and I hope that the epidemic doesn't break out here at Diamond X Second," went on Bud. "If it starts, and we don't get the water back, we may as well give up!"

He was plainly discouraged, and no wonder. He was young, and it was his first experience as a rancher "on his own." Nort and Dick, too, were a little down-hearted.

"But maybe things will look better to-morrow," suggested Nort, as they turned in for the night, having discovered nothing alarming in the direction where Pocut Pete had shot.

"Maybe," half-heartedly assented Bud.

But there was no water coming through the reservoir end of the tunnel pipe when the sun

shone again, and, after breakfast, the boy ranchers prepared to explore the dark cave-like opening which extended under the mountain.

"I hope we can turn it on," said Bud, and he looked at the concrete basin of water, trying to calculate how much longer it would last if the supply were not replenished. Already it was lower than it had been the night before, for the cattle had drunk freely during the darkness.

Lanterns were gotten ready, a supply of grub packed, weapons were looked to (for who knew what beast might not lurk in the tunnel?) and at last the boy ranchers were ready to start.

"Good luck!" wished Yellin' Kid as the little party started for the mouth of the tunnel.

"Thanks," chorused Nort, Dick and Bud.

Then they entered the black opening.

If you will imagine a hillside, with a hole, or tunnel, about ten feet high and as broad, but of irregular shape, opening into it, and on the bottom, or floor, a two-foot iron pipe out of which, at normal times, ran a stream of water, you will have a good idea of the place into which our young heroes were to enter.

The tunnel extended all the way through Snake Mountain, curving this way and that, as a brook curves its way through a meadow. In fact the tunnel had been made, centuries ago, by a stream forcing its way through the soft

parts of the mountain, and it was this old, hidden, underground streamway of which Mr. Merkel had taken advantage to bring water to Flume Valley.

The stream flowed along the bottom of the tunnel course, leaving room on either side for persons to walk, as they might walk along the banks of a stream in the open. The underground river was not more than four feet wide, and about the same in average depth, but in places it flowed with a very powerful current.

"Whew! It's black as tar here!" exclaimed Dick, as they walked in past the pipe, and found themselves in the tunnel proper.

"As bad as the Hole of Calcutta," added Nort, who had read that grim story of the Sepoy rebellion in India.

"Do you want to back out?" asked Bud, swinging his lantern so that it cast flickering shadows on the place where water had flowed, but where there was none now.

"Back out!" cried Nort. "I should say not! Lead on, Macduff!"

And they started off in the blackness of the tunnel, with only the faint gleams of the lanterns to illuminate their way. What would they find?

CHAPTER XI

THE RUSH OF WATERS

ECHOES of the footsteps of the boy ranchers sounded and resounded as they tramped along the now dry water-course of what had, only a day before, been a life-giving stream of water. The rocky and roughly-vaulted roof overhead gave back the noises like the soundbox of a phonograph, and the lads had to speak loudly, in places, to make their voices carry above the echoes. These places were spots where the vaulted roof of the tunnel was higher than usual.

They had walked on, the semi-circular spot of light at the entrance near the black pipe growing more and more faint, until it was not at all visible.

"There she goes!" exclaimed Dick, looking back.

"What?" asked his brother.

"The last gleam of daylight," was the answer. "If anything happens to our lanterns, so that they go out, and we get mixed up in some branch passages—good night! That's all

I have to say!" and Dick was very emphatic in this.

"By Zip Foster!" exclaimed Bud, using that expression for the first time in several days. "You're a cheerful chap to have along on a picnic like this, Dick! Not!"

"Well, might as well prepare for the worst and hope for the best," laughed Dick, while Nort inquired:

"Why don't you tell us more about Zip Foster?"

"Oh—you—say, did you hear anything then?" asked Bud, and his voice had in it such a note of anxiety that his companions did not, at the time, imagine he might have been putting them off from a much-wanted and often-delayed explanation of this mysterious Zip Foster personage.

"Hear what?" asked Dick.

"Something like water running," replied Bud. "I have a notion that our stream—I call it ours for it doesn't seem to belong to anyone else—our stream may just trickle off, now and then, into some other underground course."

"Maybe it does," agreed Dick. "But I don't hear any water running."

"Nor I," added his brother.

"Maybe I was mistaken," Bud admitted. "But I sure would like to come across that missing water of mine!"

He little realized, nor did the others, what

fruit his wish was to bear, and that very shortly.

"I guess what you heard was the echoes," spoke Dick. "I never heard so many queer noises."

"It's like the cave of the winds," murmured Nort. "But it's a great adventure all the same, Bud! I mean it would be great if we didn't have to worry about the water not coming back," he made haste to add, for he realized what it would mean to their new ranch in Flume Valley if no drink could be had for the cattle.

"It beats the finding of the Triceratops all to slathers!" exclaimed Dick, "and that was no slouch of a happening, either."

"Yes, no telling what's ahead of us," spoke Bud, as he walked along, unsteadily enough for the way was rough and filled with stones. And, as the boys tramped along in the tunnel, part of the time in the very bed of the stream that had gone dry, their lanterns cast fantastic shadows on the rocky walls. I have said that the stream was dry, but this was not strictly true, for in places, where the uneven bed formed depressions, there were pools of water. And, in some places, there were even little rills trickling along. But they never would reach the iron pipe that discharged into the reservoir.

On and on tramped the boys, pausing, now and then, to hold up their lanterns and inspect the rocky walls of the underground tunnel

which echoed so strangely to their footsteps, and through which swept strange, cold and clammy winds.

"Well, I reckon we'll have to go all the way to the end before we discover anything, if we do find it," said Bud, when they had walked on for over an hour. Their pace was slow because of the uneven footing.

"And when we get to the other end and find the water running into the pipe at the dam in Pocut River, what then?" asked Nort.

"We'll hardly find that, I think," said Bud. "Or, I mean, we won't have to go all the way to the other end if the water is found running there."

"Why not?" asked Dick.

"Because, if the water's running in from the dam end of the pipe, we'll meet the stream before we get all the way through the tunnel," Bud explained. "I meant to call up on the telephone and find out if everything was all right at the river end before we started out, but I forgot. My theory is that the stream gets into this tunnel from the river all right, but is shunted off before it reaches us," he added.

"How shunted?" Dick wanted to know.

"That's what I can't tell," spoke Bud. "But why try to puzzle this out until we get something better to work on? I'm hungry! What do you say that we eat?"

"Suits me," agreed Nort.

"I'm not going to vote in the negative," asserted Dick.

They judged that they were about a quarter way through the mysterious tunnel now, and, setting down the lanterns on the rocky floor, the boy ranchers took out the food they had brought with them. It would be risky to kindle a fire in that enclosed place, Bud decided, as the smoke might choke them, though so far they had found an abundance of fresh air, a current blowing part of the time in their faces, and part of the time in the opposite direction. This proved that there was a good draft in the elongated cave, but it was voted best not to take any chances, though there was plenty of dried driftwood on the tunnel floor, and this could have been used for a blaze.

But the boys sat about in the gleam of their lanterns, and, while they ate the sandwiches they had brought, they talked of the strange happenings that had led up to this venture in which they were now joined.

Suddenly Bud, who had just taken up a piece of fruit cake, part of a chunk that his pretty sister Nell had sent over from the main ranch house a day or so before, stopped chewing in order to listen better; for, as you doubtless know, the action of the jaws precludes keen attention to outside sounds.

"What's the matter?" asked Dick, noting his cousin's act.

"I heard something," Bud answered.

"I'm hearing things all the while!" declared Dick. "This is the most weird place for mysterious noises I ever struck!"

"But this is different," insisted Bud. "Listen!"

Nort and Dick stopped chewing and strained their ears to catch the sound that had attracted Bud's attention. A strange, rushing, whispering echo seemed to fill the tunnel.

"Doesn't that sound like rushing water?" asked Bud.

"Yes," agreed Dick, after a moment of intentness; "it does."

"Look out!" quickly yelled Nort. "It *is* water, and on the rush, too! Jump for your lives! It's a flood!" and making a grab for one of the lanterns, that they might not be left in total blackness, he sprang toward the rocky side of the tunnel, an example followed by his companions.

And the rush of waters filled the underground cave with a mighty, roaring sound.

CHAPTER XII

THE RISING FLOOD

STUMBLING, slipping, sliding, half-falling, bruising themselves on the sharp rocks, but ever leaping forward toward the sides of the tunnel, and away from the depressed centre down which they could see the rush of waters coming, the boy ranchers at last managed to reach the granite wall. Nort had succeeded in grabbing up one of the lanterns, but there was no time for Dick or Bud to take one, and the food had to be abandoned.

"Climb up! Climb up, if there's a ledge!" shouted Bud. "We'll be drowned if we can't get above the water!"

He had, somehow or other, brought up in the rear. Though he did not admit it, this was because he had shoved his cousins ahead of him, hoping thus to enable them to gain a safe place.

And as Nort and Dick glanced back they saw, in the gleam of the one lantern left alight, a white mass of water bearing down on them, and, seemingly, filling the tunnel from wall to wall, as it rushed foaming and murmuring onward.

It was as though a dam had suddenly burst, or some obstruction had been removed, allowing the pent-up waters to rush along the accustomed channel. And if you have ever noticed a dammed-up stream, say in some gutter, thus quickly released, you can imagine what happened on a larger scale in the tunnel where the boys were.

The water, normally, flowed only in the four-foot channel. But now it spread out on either side, and, of course, was much deeper in the centre. But as the tunnel sloped from either wall, in a sort of V shape to the centre channel, naturally the parts nearest the side walls were less covered by water than the others.

It was because of this that Bud, Nort and Dick were enabled to maintain a footing, though they were knee-deep in water in an instant, and the one remaining lantern had to be held up to prevent it from being engulfed and extinguished in the sudden flood.

"Climb up! Climb up!" shouted Bud. "Isn't there some place—some rocky ledge—where you can find a footing? The water's getting deeper!"

And this was true. Either the flood was growing at its source (a place as yet unknown to the boys) or it was running too rapidly, and in too great a volume, to accommodate itself to the tunnel channel, and was thus piling up in the vicinity of the boys.

"What happened? What caused it?" cried Nort.

"Never mind that—now!" shouted Bud. "Find the highest place you can, and stick!"

"Suppose the whole tunnel fills?" asked Dick, trying to pierce the semi-gloom, and look for a refuge on the rocky wall

"If it does we'll have to swim for it," grimly said Bud. "But isn't there some place where you can climb up?"

"This looks like a ledge," Dick answered, as he caught sight of a darker shadow on the rocky wall of the tunnel, above his head, when his brother swung the lantern.

"Just what we need!" exclaimed Bud, as he waded through the ever-deepening water to the side of his cousins. "Up with you! Here, Nort, I'll hold the lantern until you make it!"

Thus, again, Bud was seeing that his cousins reached a place of comparative safety before he looked to himself. For they found the ledge, once they had scrambled up to it, well above the water, and wide enough to give shelter and a safe perch for all three.

"Whew! That was touch and go!" murmured Bud, as he leaned back, half exhausted, against the rocky wall at the rear of the ledge.

"I should say so!" gasped Dick. "It all happened so suddenly that I don't know yet what it was all about."

"The stream suddenly started flowing

again," spoke Bud. "That's all there was to it. Must have been dammed up some place, and suddenly released. It's still rising, too," he added, as he leaned forward and held the lantern down over the ledge where he and his cousins had taken refuge.

"Rising?" sharply inquired Nort, and there was a tone of anxiety in his voice.

"Yes," remarked Bud, as he swung the lantern to and fro. "We didn't get up here any too soon, fellows! Look, the water would be up to our waists down there now, in the most shallow place, and it's got speed like one of Christy Mathewson's curves!"

His cousins could see that he had not exaggerated the matter. The waters were rising. Inch by inch, and foot by foot, the flood was approaching the crest. Where the boy ranchers had sat in the almost dry bed of the stream, to eat their lunch, there was now a mad race of swirling waters. Where they had stood, before climbing up to the ledge of safety, there was now three feet depth of water. And, as Bud had said, it was flowing along so swiftly, like the stream which turns a mill-wheel, that the boys could hardly have been able to keep their feet had they been down in the current, or even on the weakest edge of it.

But, as they were, they were safe for the time being. How long that would be the case none could tell. They could see, in the gleam of the

one lantern saved in the mad rush, that the stream was coursing along as it had never coursed before.

"There must be a powerful lot of water coming out of the reservoir pipe," Nort remarked.

"Biggest ever, with all this water behind forcing it out," agreed Bud. "I hope the pipe holds."

"It isn't as if the pipe were the only outlet," said Dick. "You know the water can flow out of the tunnel above, and on either side of the conduit."

"Yes," agreed Bud, "and dad had it put in that way on purpose, so if ever a big flood did come, the tunnel could relieve itself without ripping away the pipe and reservoir. There's a sort of spillway at one side of the reservoir, you know."

The boys from the east had noticed this. Up to now no water had run off through this auxiliary channel, but it was there for emergencies such as now had occurred. And the water could find a vent and outlet down the middle of Flume Valley, as, indeed, the surplus from the reservoir itself did, when there was any.

"Well, it sure is queer, and we had a mighty narrow escape," remarked Nort, as Bud leaned back again with the lantern. "But the fellows back at the camp will be scared."

"I reckon they will," admitted Bud. "They'll see the water spouting out, in a

greater volume than ever before, and they'll imagine all sorts of things have happened to us."

"Well, nothing has happened yet—except we've lost two perfectly good lanterns, and what grub we didn't eat," asserted Nort.

"But something else may happen," said Bud in a low voice, as, once more, he leaned forward, and again held the lantern over the edge of the rocky ledge.

"What?" Dick wanted to know.

"Look," was what Bud replied. And his cousins, glancing down, saw that the waters were rising, rising, rising!

When would they stop?

CHAPTER XIII

WHERE DID IT GO?

PRESSING back toward the rocky ledge, against which they leaned, gazing with fearsome eyes at the rising waters, on which the lantern-light shone fitfully, and almost holding their breaths at times, so great was the strain, the boy ranchers waited—for what they scarcely knew. And yet they did, in a measure.

For they waited to see if the waters would stop rising, a happening, as they well knew, which, alone, could save their lives.

As one of them had remarked, they might have to swim for it. But, looking at the foaming current, dashing along over jagged rocks on which the boys had more than once stumbled, they knew what a risk that effort to escape would bring.

And should the water fill the whole tunnel they would have no earthly chance!

For only a fish can exist in a hose or pipe completely filled with water, and that is what the tunnel would become if the water rose to the

roof—merely a great, underground rocky pipe for the conveying of the liquid from Pocut River.

So you can easily imagine with what anxiety Bud, Nort and Dick watched the rising water. Every now and again one of them would lean over the ledge, swinging the lantern to and fro, so its gleams would be reflected in the hurrying, foaming stream, and indicate how fast it was rising.

At first the rate of rise had been rapid. But as the boys, again and again, made observations in the semi-gloom Bud, at length, uttered a joyful cry.

"Look!" he shouted, pointing with trembling finger at the foamy flood close, now, to the top of the ledge. "Look!"

"What—a big fish?" asked Dick.

"Fish nothing!" retorted his cousin. "But the water is going down! Look, it isn't as high as it was. I can see a wet mark where it came up to, and it's two inches below that now! The flood is going down!"

"Are you sure?" asked Nort, eagerly.

"Look for yourselves!" invited Bud, handing over the lantern.

Nort's observation was confirmatory of his cousin's.

"She *is* going down!" remarked Nort. "And just in time, too!"

How truly he spoke was evidenced by that

fact that another inch of rise would have sent the flood over the ledge on which the boys rested!

So narrow had been their escape!

"If she only doesn't begin to rise again, after she starts going down—as you say she is—we'll be all right," said Dick. "But if she comes up——"

He did not finish what he started to say, but his companions knew what he meant, and they looked each other in the face with grave apprehensions.

"The question is now," went on Bud, as he again took an observation and noted that the flood was still on the descent, "how long we shall have to stay here."

"If it's too long we'll be wanting some of that grub which was washed away," asserted Dick. "In fact I dropped a sandwich half eaten."

"Same here," remarked his brother. "But let's hope that it will go down as suddenly as it came up."

That was all they could do—hope; but it bore fruits, for in about an hour, as they ascertained by glances at their watches, the flood was almost down to the normal channel of the underground stream.

"And if it will only stay there we can venture to keep on to the other end of the tunnel," spoke Bud.

"Will you do that?" Dick wanted to know.

"Why not?" asked Bud. "We want to see what happened, and where this water goes to when it disappears so suddenly; don't we?"

"Yes," agreed Dick. "But I thought, after our escape, that we had better head back for camp."

"It's about six of one and half a dozen of the other," asserted Bud. "We're almost half way through the tunnel, now, and we might as well keep on. I'd like to solve this mystery, and we can't if we call it off now."

"That's right," assented Nort. "We don't run any more danger going on to the river end of the tunnel than we would in going back to the camp end. That is unless we discover a big cavern, or hole through to China, in the other end of the tunnel. Even then we might be able to skirt around it."

"Let's go on!" suggested Bud, as he prepared to climb down off the ledge. "This thing has my goat!"

"Speaking of goats is most appropriate on a cattle ranch," laughed Nort, and the spirits of all the lads were lighter now. "But let's keep on to the end for which we started!"

This was agreed to and, after waiting a little while to make sure that the waters were not again going to rise, away started the boy ranchers. They were traveling lighter now, for they only had one lantern, and no food to carry.

The remainder of the tunnel was as the first part had been—a great, uneven tube through the mountain, twisting and turning here and there, sometimes the roof being so high that it did not show in the swinging lantern-light, and again being low enough, almost, for the boys to touch.

On all sides was evidence that the flood had been here, as it had been at the place where the boys took refuge. Now and then they came to deep pools, which they had to skirt, and, in one case, leap over.

Suddenly, as they were walking along, the lantern which Bud was carrying went out, leaving them in pitch blackness!

"Hello! What's the idea?" asked Nort.

"Did you do it on purpose?" asked Dick.

"Why, no, of course not!" asserted Bud. "The oil must be gone, though I filled it before we started, and it ought to have burned longer than this."

"Whew! This is tough!" bemoaned Nort. "Left in the dark!"

"Not altogether!" exclaimed Bud. "I brought some candles!"

"Great!" voiced Nort. "Light up!"

Which Bud did, placing a short length of candle inside the lantern, by fastening it, with some grease that hardened, on top of the oil reservoir of the wick.

"But I can't understand what happened the

lantern," went on Bud, making an examination by means of a second candle, from the store he had, luckily, placed in his pocket. "Oh, yes, I can!" he went on.

"What?" asked Dick.

"One of the soldered seams of the lantern oil tank started, and the oil has leaked out. Guess one of us must have banged it against a stone when we made the rush. But we'll be all right. A candle in the lantern is nearly as good as the regular wick."

It was not quite so good, but the boys made the best of it as they tramped on through the tunnel, hoping to reach the river end without another flood, or any mishap.

"The water seems to be behaving very nicely," observed Nort, as they all saw that the stream was well within its rocky channel.

"But what gets me," said Bud, "is where it goes to—when it goes. I mean where does it disappear to? We haven't come to a single branch tunnel, or any other passage that could drain off the river water."

"That's right," agreed his cousins.

"But maybe we'll find it further on," suggested Nort.

"We'll soon know, for we must be close to the other end now," observed Bud. "Our candles are holding out well."

They had come several miles, as they knew by the time consumed. The way through the

tunnel had been uphill all the way, as it must needs be to allow the water to run down to the reservoir in Flume Valley. But, so far, they had seen nothing to indicate any side channel for the stream—any place that might drain off the water, and return it in such a sudden volume as to cause a flood.

"I can't understand it," Bud remarked as he swung the lantern to and fro. "It sure is a puzzle. Where does the water disappear?"

His cousins could offer no solution. All the way along they had carefully scanned the underground stream, but there appeared no break in its uneven, rocky bank in the middle of the tunnel.

"Well, let's keep on," suggested Nort. "We aren't at the end yet, and it may be close to the intake—I mean the mysterious influence—that shuts off our water supply and turns it on again, may be there. Forward, march!" he cried gaily.

Together they started off, having come to a momentary halt to inspect a place wider and deeper than usual, when Bud suddenly came to a stop and exclaimed:

"Some one is coming!"

CHAPTER XIV

A NIGHT ATTACK

INSTANTLY the boy ranchers came to a halt, standing there in the tunnel, beside the running water. They had nearly reached the other end of the flume, and could dimly see, ahead of them, a faint glow, which told of daylight to come. Bud, who was carrying the lantern, made shift to hide it behind the bodies of himself and his cousins, so that the unknown, approaching, might not have them at a disadvantage, he being in the dark.

"Who you reckon it is?" asked Nort. He and his brother were rapidly falling into the custom of using the picturesque if not always elegant talk of the west. Nort spoke in a whisper, and Bud answered in the same tone.

"Can't imagine who it may be," spoke the western lad, "but if it's Hank, Del Pinzo, or any of their gang——"

He did not finsh, but a slight movement told that he was freeing his .45 in its holster, an example quickly followed by Nort and Dick.

Meanwhile the steps continued to approach,

echoing loudly in the vaulted tunnel, as if the maker of them had no design to conceal his movements. In another few seconds the boys saw, looming in front of them, as displayed by the gleam of their half-hidden lantern, a bulky figure. At the same moment the figure seemed to become aware of the presence in the tunnel of others besides himself.

"Who's there?" came in sharp challenge.

And what a relief it was to the boy ranchers when they heard that voice.

"Slim!" cried Bud. "Slim Degnan!"

"That you, Bud?" called the foreman of Diamond X ranch, as he recognized the voice of his employer's son, while Bud, in turn, sensed whom the looming figure was.

"Sure!" Bud joyously answered. "And Nort and Dick are here! Say, what's the matter with our water? Is there a stoppage at the dam?"

"Nary a stop, but your dad got a telephone from your side-partners at the valley camp, saying you'd started through the tunnel to see what caused the shut-off. I happened to be over near Square M, seeing if I could get on the track of that cattle epidemic, and they relayed your dad's message on to me. So I hit the trail for here."

"What was dad's message?" Bud wanted to know.

"Why, he said you, and them tenderfeet——

No, I'll take *that* back!" Slim hastened to say as he recalled all that Nort and Dick had done. "Anyhow, he said they shouldn't have allowed you to come in the tunnel alone, and he asked some of the men, from this end, to go in and see if they could locate you."

"You found us," said Bud.

"Well," resumed Slim, "I just got here, heard the news and I started in. Some of the others are coming, but I guess we don't need to make any search. You're here!"

"And more by good luck than good management," asserted Dick.

"How's that?" asked Slim, as they all started for the opening at the river end of the tunnel, where daylight dimly showed.

"Why, when we started in at the other side the stream was dry," explained Bud. "There wasn't a drop coming through the pipe into the reservoir, and we left, early this morning, to see what the trouble was. When we got half way through the stream suddenly began flowing, and there was a regular flood. Only that we found a ledge to climb up on, we'd been drowned!"

"As bad as that!" gasped Slim.

"Every bit!" Dick asserted.

"But tell me," went on Bud, "did the water stop at the river end, Slim? Was there any stoppage at the dam or pipe?"

"Nary a stop, Bud," Slim answered. "They

told me, when I started in, that the water had been flowing all night, as usual, and they didn't see why you claimed there was none at your end."

"By Zip Foster! But there's something mighty strange here!" cried the boy rancher.

"You intimated good and plenty that time!" declared Slim as he and the boys reached the river end of the tunnel, where the intake pipe took the water from the Pocut stream, delivering it to the tunnel.

"But here's a queer part of it," went on Dick, as they joined the other cowboys who were preparing to follow Slim in, and search for the Diamond X lads. "No such body of water, as so nearly overwhelmed us, ever came through this pipe," and he pointed to the one that tapped the dammed-up water of the river.

"That's right!" agreed Bud. "This thing gets worse and worse! We'll never get to the bottom of this mystery!"

"You're right!" declared one of the cowboys. "When you're dealing with them underground water-courses you never know what you're up against. The old Indians and Spaniards who lived here hundreds of years ago had their own troubles, and maybe they wished them same troubles on to you."

"What you mean?" asked Slim. "That's all bosh!"

"Bosh nothin'!" declared another. "You

read history an' you'll get lots of cases where streams showed up, and then vanished under mountains, more than once."

"A heap sight you know about *hist'ry!*" laughed Slim in good-natured raillery.

"Well, this is sure queer, anyhow!" declared Bud. "Is there any history of the stream that waters our valley?" he asked the cowboy who had made the assertion.

"Not your particular one," was the answer, "but there's lots of just such cases mentioned —hidden water-courses and all that."

"Well, there's something wrong," agreed Bud, "and I believe there must be some place along the tunnel where our water shunts itself off at times, and turns itself on again. We were looking for just such a place."

"And you didn't find it?" asked Slim.

"Nary a find!" asserted Bud.

"But we aren't going to give up, just on that account!" said Nort.

"Bet you not!" added his brother. "We'll try it again, and take a canoe with us, so if the dry water-course suddenly turns wet, we can paddle along it."

"Well, it seems to be all right now," spoke Slim. "And you'd better 'phone your father that you're all right, Bud. He'll be anxious to hear."

And after Mr. Merkel had been assured, over the wire, of the safe transit of his son and

nephews through the tunnel, the boys' camp was called up, to let Old Billee and the others know that no accident had happened.

"Gosh! I'm glad to hear that!" said the veteran cowboy over the wire. "When we see that there water come gushin' out, we thought sure you was goners, Bud!"

"Then the water is running again?" Bud asked.

"Absolutely!" declared Billee. "You comin' back here?"

"Sure! But *over* the mountain—not *under* it."

Bud and his boy rancher chums remained that night at the store settlement near the dam, getting beds in what passed for a hotel. It was too late to secure horses and ride over Snake Mountain trail back to Flume Valley.

While thus having a night of leisure, and seeing such sights as were to be viewed in the little town, Bud and his chums discussed the queer situation of the mysteriously disappearing and reappearing water. But, talk as they did, and venture opinions as they and their cowboy friends did, no one could hit on a solution.

"We'll just have to make another and more careful inspection," declared Nort.

"That's what!" agreed Bud.

They learned from Slim that the situation regarding the cattle epidemic at Square M ranch was not much better. All stock which

had not been exposed to the infection had been removed, either to Diamond X, Triangle B or Flume Valley, and the infected steers remaining there were being treated by a veterinarian whom Mr. Merkel had engaged.

"But they're slowly dying off," Slim reported. "And I don't believe Square M ranch will ever be safe to use again."

"Why not?" asked Bud.

"Because there must be some infection in the grass there to have made so many of the cattle sicken and die."

"Maybe it was something else," suggested Nort.

"Well, maybe," assented the foreman. "It's about as mysterious as that underground river of yours. Had any more warnings, Bud?"

"No, I guess they're done with. And I believe it's a natural cause, and not due to any work of enemies, that accounts for the queer way our flume acts."

"Um!" spoke Slim musingly, and that was all he would say.

Borrowing horses from their friends, the boy ranchers next day made the trip over Snake Mountain and returned to camp, finding matters there in good shape. There was an abundance of water in the reservoir, and the pipe was flowing freely.

For more than a week nothing happened. The cattle at Flume Valley, including those of

the boy ranchers, and the herd transferred from Square M to save it from the epidemic, were doing well, abundant grass and water being their portions.

There was no lack of hard work for the boys and their cowboy assistants, for it was not all easy sailing. Occasionally bunches of steers would stray, and have to be driven back by hard riding. There were night watches to be carried on, and another bunch of cattle was shipped away.

Bud, Dick and Nort hazed them over to the railroad, and on the trip a small-sized stampede gave them all they wanted to handle. But they were true sons of the west, and did not complain.

"Whew! That was hot, while it lasted!" exclaimed Bud, as he and cousins managed to get the stampeding animals quieted, after they had tried so hard to run off by themselves, in varying directions.

"Yes, a thing like that gives you an appetite," remarked Dick.

"As if *you* ever needed any stimulant!" laughed Nort. "I never saw the time yet when you had to be offered an inducement to sit up to grub!"

"You either!" retorted the stout lad. "But, speaking of grub, when do we eat, Bud?"

"Might as well make it right soon," was the answer. "Now that we have the steers quieted

they'll be glad enough to take it easy. I planned to water 'em at the next stopping place, and that will give us a chance to see what Buck Tooth put up for us."

"Stay there all night; will we?" asked Nort.

"Might as well," assented his cousin. "No use running all the fat off our stock. We want 'em to weigh as heavy as possible."

This was good business tact on the part of the boy ranchers. For cattle are generally sold by weight, either "on the hoof," which means alive and as they stand in the stock yards, or by weight after being slaughtered. In the case of ranchers "on the hoof" is generally understood.

And driving a bunch of steers at too great a speed from the ranch to the railroad would make them thin, "running off their fat," so to speak, thus losing all the advantages of the rich fodder to which they had had access. And when it is considered that it is not at all difficult to cause a steer to lose from ten to fifteen pounds by means of poor driving, and when to this statement is added the fact that this loss is multiplied in hundreds of steers, Bud's state of mind can easily be imagined.

"Yes, we'll get 'em quieted down, and take it easy ourselves," suggested the Western lad. And, a little later when some of the steers broke into a run, Nort exclaimed:

"Are they stampeding again?"

"No. I reckon they just smell water," Bud answered.

This proved to be true, and this contagion spread all through the herd, though with no ill effects, for the water hole was not far off and, reaching it, the animals stopped to drink.

There was some confusion and excitement because so many thirsty cattle all wanted to drink at once, but it did not last long, and Bud, Nort and Dick were glad when they could slip from their saddles, tossing the reins over their ponies' heads as an intimation to the animals not to stray.

"Oh boy! But I'm tired!" exclaimed Nort, sighing.

"Add hungry to that and I'm with you," said his brother. For there had been days of long and difficult work in preparing this bunch of cattle for shipment.

"Getting tired of the game?" asked Bud, as he rustled up some sticks of greasewood to make a fire over which they might boil coffee and fry bacon.

"Not on your life!" laughed Nort. "We're in the game to stick!"

"Sure thing!" asserted Dick.

They made a simple but ample meal over the camp fire and then, as evening settled down over the vast prairies, and quiet enfolded them like some soft mantle, they lay on their blankets and gazed at the feeding cattle.

The steers were very quiet now, evidently feeling quite satisfied with the manner in which they had been treated, and having, of course, no intimation of the fate in store for them. They had food and water and that is all they required. Overhead was the cloudless sky, in which sparkling stars were beginning to stud themselves.

"I hope the market is well up in price when we get to the yards," observed Bud, idly chewing on a spear of grass.

"Yes, it would be dandy to get a big price for this stock," agreed Nort.

The boy ranchers were rapidly becoming interested in the business end of their venture, as they had been, for some time, in the more picturesque side. The difference of a fraction of a cent in the price of cattle on the hoof meant the difference of several hundred of dollars where there were many tons of meat to be considered.

"Well, we'd better ride herd a little while, to make sure they get bedded down quietly," suggested Bud, as it began to get darker. "Then we'll roll up and snooze ourselves."

This "bedding down" of the cattle, meaning thereby inducing them to get quiet enough so they would lie down contentedly chewing their cuds, was part of the routine of a cowboy's life.

"Some of 'em have already started in," ob-

served Nort, as he went up to his pony, which, with the other two animals, had been contentedly grazing. "Looks like they'd lived here all their lives."

He indicated a score or more of the steers that were stretched out on the rich grass which at once formed their food and their bed.

"Yes, I reckon we'll have a quiet night," observed Bud.

The three chums slowly rode around the bunch of cattle, the lads occasionally breaking into the chorus of some song.

The cattle seemed to like this singing—not that this is to be considered a compliment to the voices of Nort, Dick and Bud, though their tones were far from unmusical. But the fact is that animals of most sorts are fond of music in any form, and nothing so seems to soothe and quiet a bunch of cattle, especially at night, as the singing of the herders.

Perhaps it is due to this fact that we have so many cowboy songs with an interminable number of verses, in which there is little sense or sequence—a mere jumble of words, often repeated. The cattle seem to care more for the tune than for the sentiment.

At any rate the bunch from Flume Valley grew more quiet as the night became darker, and when the remains of their camp fire gleamed dully in the blackness, as they made

their way back to it, Bud and his cousins considered their work done for the day.

"We won't stand any regular watch," Bud said. "I think they'll be all right. But if we should hear a disturbance—I mean any one of us—he can awaken the others, and we'll do whatever we have to."

"And if we have any luck we won't have to roll out," observed Nort, as he spread out his blankets and tarpaulin, which last was to keep the dampness of the ground away.

"Then I'm going to cross my fingers for luck," observed Dick.

Save for the occasional distant howl of a coyote, or the uneasy movement of an occasional steer, with, now and then, the clashing of the horns of some of the beasts, there was silence in the camp. Bud was the first to fall asleep, because he was more accustomed to this sort of life than were his cousins. But they were rapidly falling in with the ways of the west, which teaches a wayfarer to consider home wherever he hangs up his hat, and his bed any place he can throw his blanket and saddle.

But finally Nort and Dick dropped off into slumber, which became sounder as the hours of night passed. All three of the boy ranchers were tired and they were in the most healthful state imaginable, brought about by their life in the open.

What hour it was Dick had no idea, but he was suddenly awakened by sensing some movement near him—too near for comfort considering his exposed sleeping position. For he felt something cold and clammy at the back of his neck, as though a chunk of ice, or a hand dipped in cold water, had touched him.

"Hi! Who's doing that?" yelled Dick, for he had a sudden dream that he was back at school, and some one was playing a trick on him. "Cut it out!"

No sooner had he spoken than he realized that he had awakened Nort and Bud, for by the flickering light of the embers of the fire he could see them sitting up and staring over at him.

"What's the matter?" demanded Bud.

"Something tickled the back of my neck," declared Dick. "I guess a coyote must have been picking up scraps of food, and smelled of me. Hope he didn't take me for a dead one!"

"Coyote!" exclaimed Bud. "I don't believe you could get one to come near you, not as long as you breathed. It must have been a——"

"Snake!" broke in Nort, without thinking of what the word might mean.

"Wow! Don't say that!" cried Dick, and he leaped up, scattering his blanket and tarpaulin each in a different direction.

"Shut up!" commanded Bud, laughing. "Do you want to start the cattle off again? If it was

a snake it won't hurt you, and it was probably more scared than you, Dick."

"Yes—maybe!" said the other. He lighted a stick of greasewood at the fire, and looked about his part of the sleeping ground. But he found nothing in the animal line.

"Guess you dreamed it!" said Nort.

"I certainly did not!" emphatically declared his brother.

"Well, go to sleep again," advised Bud. "If you feel it a second time call me!"

"Huh! I'll do that all right!" declared Dick.

He carefully shifted his sleeping place, making a searching examination of the ground before spreading out his tarpaulin. And he was some little time in dropping off to slumber again.

But there was no further disturbance in the night, and in the morning Bud looked for marks on the ground, declaring the visitor had been a prairie dog, which Dick declared his unbelief in, sticking to the snake theory as being more sensational.

After breakfast they started to drive the cattle again, reaching the railroad yards and successfully transacting the business of selling their stock.

It was the night that Bud and his cousins returned from having driven the steers to the railroad yard that something happened which

again brought to the front all their worries and anxieties.

They were all seated about the camp fire, and Pocut Pete had just arisen, remarking that he would get ready for his turn at night-riding, when there was a sort of hissing in the air over the heads of those gathered about the blaze, and something hit the ground in the midst of the circle.

"What's that?" exclaimed Nort.

"An arrow!" answered Bud, and so it proved. An Indian arrow—of the sort used by the Redmen years ago, and hard to pick up now, even as relics—quivered in the ground near the blaze. And by the flickering flames it was seen that a paper was rolled about it.

In an instant Bud had leaped to his feet, plucked the arrow from the ground, and torn off the paper. By the light of the fire he read it.

"Another warning!" cried Bud.

"What does it say?" demanded Dick.

Bud read:

"Two wasn't enough. This is the third and last! Leave Flume Valley!"

There was silence for a moment, and then Bud, crushing the scrawled warning in his hand, cried:

"I'd like to see 'em drive me out!"

"That's th' way to talk!" shouted Yellin' Kid. "We'll stick!'

They gathered about, discussing the sinister warning that had been sent to them in such a sensational manner. There was no clue to tell where it had come from, for no one had noticed the direction whence the arrow had been shot. The message itself was written, or, rather, printed on a piece torn from a paper bag, and the writing was in pencil. The paper was common enough in those parts, and the use of printing, in place of handwriting, would, it seemed, preclude any tracing.

"We'd better keep a double watch to-night," suggested Bud, when a hasty inspection in the vicinity of the camp had revealed no one.

"We shore will!" asserted Old Billee.

The night hours passed, a double guard watching with keen eyes for any sign of strangers approaching the reservoir or the cattle. But, in spite of all precautions, the half-expected happened.

It was toward morning, when Nort and Dick had turned out of warm beds to relieve Pocut Pete and Snake Purdee that a confused noise at the extreme end of the valley gave notice that something was wrong.

"What's that?" asked Bud, who had ridden into camp at the conclusion of his tour of duty.

As if in answer came distant shots, the howls

of coyotes and the snorting of cattle, mingled with a rush which told its own story.

"Stampede!" yelled Bud. "They're trying to stampede our herd and drive 'em off! Come on, fellows!"

And all within the sound of his voice rallied to repel the night attack, for such it proved to be.

Leaping into their saddles, Nort and Dick followed Bud toward the scene of the disturbance. They saw the cattle running to and fro, and in the slivers of light that leaped from the muzzles of guns which were shot off at intervals, they descried figures swiftly riding backward and forward, evidently trying to cut out bunches of cattle.

Action had followed rapidly on the heels of the sinister arrow warning.

CHAPTER XV

THE BRANDING IRON

"COME on, boys! Come on!" shouted Bud, as he spurred off in the darkness, followed by Nort and Dick. "They're trying to drive 'em off through the lower end of the valley! We've got to stop 'em!"

"You said it!" shouted Dick.

"Who are they?" yelled Nort.

Bud had no time to answer. What was needed, then, was quick action to prevent his own and his cousins', as well as his father's stock from the Square M ranch, being driven off by unscrupulous rustlers.

For that this night attack was made by these marauders of the plains was not to be doubted.

"Ride hard, boys! Ride hard!" shouted Old Billee as he galloped up beside the boy ranchers.

And they were riding hard—all of them, including the cow punchers who had come in from their night's duties, expecting to be relieved. It was at this favorable—for them—moment that the rascals had made their attack.

It was so dark that only, indistinctly, could the forms of raiders be made out. But there were several of them, leaning low over the necks of their galloping steeds, and endeavoring to create a panic among the cattle so that a stampede would result. Once this started it would be a comparatively easy matter for them to "cut out" as many choice specimens as possible, driving them to some secret place. There the brands could be "blurred," or changed, and Diamond X Second would be out several thousands of dollars.

"There they are!" yelled Bud, as, riding between Nort and Dick, he saw a group of men swinging their big hats and heard them shouting to frighten the already thoroughly roused cattle.

But though Bud thus indicated the presence of the rustlers it was not a very clear sight of them that he or his companions had. Only for the fact that those of Flume Valley rode together, and saw the indistinct forms ahead of them, could it be made certain that the unknown ones were the enemy.

"Crack!"

Bud's gun shot out a menacing warning, for he had fired high in the air, above the heads of the rustlers. He had borne in mind his father's injunction never to shoot at a human being unless vital necessity required it.

"And I'd rather lose all my cattle than kill

anyone," Bud said afterward. "Unless I had to do it to save my life."

It was for this reason that he had fired high, and his example was followed by his cousins.

But that this consideration on the part of our friends was not appreciated, was made plain, a moment later, when Old Billee exclaimed:

"That was a close one!"

His words followed the whining song of a bullet as it zipped through the air, too close to the heads of himself and the boy ranchers to be comfortable.

"I'm goin' t' give 'em some of th' same medicine!" shouted Yellin' Kid, and his gun spat fire, but straight out, and not at a high angle.

Following it, almost instantly, was a yell of pain from one of the rustlers—which one could not be told because of the mix-up and the darkness, but it was a yell nevertheless.

"You winged one!" cried Snake Purdee.

"I meant to!" was the Kid's grim answer.

"Fire high, boys!" cried Bud. "If we can scare 'em off, so much the better!"

"Don't reckon they're th' kind that scares easy," objected Old Billee. "But we've got 'em on the run!" he exclaimed, a moment or two later, when Bud and his party had ridden around some intervening bunches of cattle, and were headed straight for the night attackers.

This seemed to describe the situation. So promptly had the boys of Flume Valley ridden out to repell the raid that the rustlers had no time to stampede the cattle, and cut out some to drive away. Now it seemed there must be a clash—a coming together of the two forces.

But the rustlers, unscrupulous as they were, evidently knew when discretion was the better part of valor. They fired several more shots, one of which scratched Old Billee while another gave an ugly wound to Snake Purdee.

Then, with yells of defiance, and before our boys could come close enough to recognize any of the raiders, the rustlers galloped off, not having succeeded in driving away any cattle.

But their attack had not been without damage to Flume Valley stock. For two valuable steers had been shot, and so wounded that they had to be killed, while several calves were trampled on and crushed into shapeless masses.

This, together with two wounded men, Old Billee and Snake, made up the sum total of the casualties on the part of the Diamond X Second outfit.

"But they're marked!" shouted Yellin' Kid as he and the others rode back to camp. "I got one, I'm sure!"

"I fired low, after I saw they were doing the same, and I saw one nearly slump out of his saddle," declared old Billee.

"I'd like to know if they were any of the Hank Fisher or Del Pinzo gang," said Bud.

"I wouldn't put it past them," asserted Snake. "We'll ride over t' Hank's place, casual like, t'-day, an' see if any of his men are hurt."

Snake spoke rightly of "to-day," for it was getting sunrise-light when the battle was over, and the party returned to the tents near the flume reservoir.

The night of excitement, following the mysterious warning sent by the Indian arrow, had ended, and everyone welcomed the hot, fragrant coffee made by Buck Tooth.

When Snake's wound and Billee's scratch had been bandaged, the dead calves buried and the best part of the killed steers cut off for fresh beef, Bud and his friends took what might be termed an accounting.

The boy ranchers, with Old Billee, rode back over the ground covered in the attack of the night. The veteran cow puncher pointed out where the rustlers had ridden into the valley, over a pass that crossed a low mountain range, which connected, in a fashion, Buffalo Ridge and Snake Mountain. This ridge formed the lower boundary of Bud's range, and once the cattle had been driven over this they could easily have been hazed to Hank Fisher's Double Z ranch.

"Well, there's nothing to make sure it was

any of Del Pinzo's gang, except general suspicion," remarked Bud, as they were about to ride back to camp. "What's the matter?" he asked, for, with an exclamation, Nort had leaped from his saddle. The eastern lad was picking up something from the ground that had been so lately trampled by steers and horses.

"Look!" exclaimed Nort, and he held up a branding iron.

"One of ours?" asked Bud, in rather a commonplace voice.

"Not exactly," Nort answered. "It's marked with a double Z!"

CHAPTER XVI

QUEER ACTIONS

WHAT effect this announcement had on Dick and Bud can easily be imagined. Both leaped from their saddles, as Nort had done, and gathered close to him as he held the branding iron in his hand.

It was of the usual type, an iron plate, which had been cast in a mould, so that the device—two Z letters—formed a depression in the smooth surface of the iron plate. On the outer edge was a circle, so that when the brand was heated, and pressed on the hide of a steer, calf or maverick it would burn the impression of a double Z inside a ring—the mark of Hank Fisher's cattle.

"Whew!" exclaimed Dick. "This makes it look bad for them, Bud!"

"Oh, not necessarily, though I'm glad we found it," spoke the western lad.

"Why isn't it suspicious?" asked Nort, whose high hopes had been rather dashed by Bud's somewhat cool reception of Dick's statement.

"Oh, it's *suspicious* all right!" Bud hastened to say, "and don't imagine I'm making light of you finding this, Nort! I'm mighty glad you did! Only we can't make it look bad for Hank Fisher, or the Double Z crowd unless we can fasten this on them."

"You mean we can't prove they dropped it here during the raid last night?" asked Nort, as he vaulted into the saddle.

"That's it," spoke Bud. "It does look suspicious, I'll admit. But you see while this is our range, we couldn't make a fuss just because some cowboy from Double Z rode over it. That wouldn't be right. And what's to hinder this having been dropped by some cowboy who was merely riding over our range?"

"That's possible," admitted Dick.

"But I don't believe it," asserted Nort.

"Nor I," chimed in Bud. "But you got to go slow in making accusations out west, unless you're ready to back your opinion up with a gun; and we don't want to do that."

"No," Nort admitted. "But Old Billee and Snake said they were going to ride over to Double Z to-day, to sort of size up the situation. So what's to prevent 'em taking this branding iron along and asking, casual like, if they don't want it back?"

"Nothing to stop that," said Bud with a grin. "In fact that's just what we'll do. Come on, we'll hit the trail for the camp and make

a sort of raid on Double Z—only we'll make it to-morrow instead of to-day, as it's too late for a long ride."

There were murmurs of surprise and excitement at the camp, when the boys rode in with the Double Z branding iron that Nort had picked up at the scene of the raid.

"They dropped that last night, sure as horned toads!" cried Snake Purdee, whose wound was excuse enough for not being out on duty.

"I reckon," agreed Pocut Pete, who likewise was off duty. "Let's see that," and he reached for the iron which had a wooden handle to enable a cowboy to manipulate the marker when the branding end was hot.

Bud, so Nort and Dick thought, looked rather curiously at Pocut Pete while the latter was examining the iron. And when the strange cowboy—strange in the sense that he had not been long in Mr. Merkel's service—took out his knife and began whittling away at the wooden handle, Bud uttered a sharp cry of:

"Stop!"

"What's the matter?" asked Pocut Pete, with an assumption of innocence, which was so plainly an assumption that Nort and Dick exchanged rapid glances.

"Don't cut off those initials!" went on Bud. "Maybe by them we can tell who owns the iron."

"Initials!" exclaimed Pocut Pete. "I don't see any initials!"

"There they are," and Bud pointed to some, rather faintly cut, on a flat place in the handle. "E. C. are the letters, though I don't know anybody with them at Double Z."

"I don't, either," said Pocut Pete. "In fact, I didn't see them letters, Bud. I was just whittling the handle to see what kind of wood it was. Thought maybe I could tell by that."

"All right," spoke Bud, as he again assumed charge of the branding iron. And Pocut Pete, with a sharp look at the young rancher, went out to the corral where the spare ponies were kept.

"Was he really trying to cut out those initials?" asked Nort, as the three boy ranchers passed on to the grub tent, for it was the joyful time to eat—one of the three joyful times that came each day.

"I wouldn't say he was doing it *deliberately,*" spoke Bud, "but he certainly *was* whittling near those letters. And if he had cut them off the owner of the branding iron could easily claim it wasn't his."

"That was queer," declared Dick.

"Very," assented Bud. "In fact Pocut Pete has acted queer ever since he's been here. I don't like him, and as soon as dad has another puncher to spare I'm going to ask for a change."

The remainder of that day and the night passed quietly. There was no other alarm, and riding herd was an easy task. Nor was there any stoppage of the water, which ran freely out through the pipe from the underground tunnel as though there had never been any interruption of its very necessary service.

"Well, let's go!" exclaimed Bud next day, as he and his cousins saddled their ponies, and Old Billee called for Yellin' Kid to help catch a rather frisky pinto that the old cowboy was going to ride.

"Over to Double Z?" asked Nort.

"Yes, we'll take a sort of a look around their place, and hand back this iron," went on Bud, as he slung the implement to his saddle by a loop of his lariat.

The ride to Double Z was pleasant enough, for soon the boys and Old Billee struck the hill trail, where it was cooler than down in the valley.

But if they hoped to discover any incriminating evidence at Hank Fisher's place they were disappointed.

There was no sign of Del Pinzo—in fact that wily Mexican half-breed was seldom at the ranch proper. Nor was Hank at home. But his foreman met the boys and Old Billee.

"Hear about the racket over at our place?" asked Bud, easily enough, but with a beating

heart. He and his cousins looked around for any signs of wounded men, but saw none.

"What racket?" asked Ike Johnson, the foreman.

"Rustlers," put in Old Billee. "They scratched me, shot up Snake Purdee and dropped this—or at least we found this after the mix-up when we'd druv 'em off!" and he took the branding iron from Bud's saddle loop.

"You don't mean to say——" began Ike, with an ugly tone to his voice.

"Don't mean t' say nawthin'!" drawled Old Billee. "That's one of your irons, I take it."

"Yes, it is," growled the foreman slowly. "But that don't mean——"

"Course it don't!" pleasantly interrupted the old cowboy, giving the young ranchers a slight signal to let him do the talking. "One of your boys dropped it, likely, ridin' short-cut across our place, Ike."

"Yes, I remember now, Ed Carr said he lost his. This is it," and the foreman of Double Z pointed to the initials.

"Well, tell Ed—is he here now?" asked Billee, interrupting himself.

For an instant—and for an instant only—Ike Johnson hesitated. Then he answered:

"No, Ed's ridin' line. I'll give him this when he comes in."

"All right," spoke Billee, with a smile. "We was just passin' and stopped with it. How's

things, Ike?" he asked with an effort to be friendly.

"Oh, so-so! Might be wuss, an' might be a hull lot better."

"I reckon it's that way all over," Billee made answer. "Well, boys," he resumed, "might as well ride back. You gittin' all the water you can use from Pocut River, ain't you, Ike?" he asked, turning in his saddle.

"Better ask th' boss about that," was the sullen retort. "I reckon he'll have suthin' t' say, soon, that you Diamond X folks won't like!"

"Is that a threat?" asked Bud quickly.

"Easy, son, easy!" cautioned Old Billee.

"You can make anythin' yo' like of it!" sneered the Double Z foreman.

And then the boy ranchers and Old Billee rode off.

"Well, we didn't find out much," said Nort, when they were on the homeward trail.

"No, but we let 'em know we found that branding iron, and that we knew where it belonged," spoke Bud. "That's something!"

They were rather late getting back to camp, for Dick's pony went lame, and the others accommodated their pace to his. It was dusk when the little party hit the borders of Diamond X Second, and saw the grazing cattle.

Bud saw something else, for as he rode ahead he called:

"What's he doing?"

"Who?" asked Nort.

"Pocut Pete," replied Bud. "Looks like he was trying to brand one of our cattle with his knife! Look! That's mighty queer!"

CHAPTER XVII

"GERMS!"

POCUT PETE did not become aware of the approach of the boy ranchers and Old Billee until they were almost upon him. He was either so intent on what he was doing, or else the fact that the ponies were on a grassy footing made their advance practically noiseless, that, seemingly, he heard nothing.

However it was, the cowboy, about whom Bud entertained suspicious, kept on with what he was doing—something strange to one of the milder-tempered steers. Something "mighty queer," as Bud had said in a whisper to his chums. Which whisper accounted for the fact that Pocut Pete had not heard the voice.

So it was not until their shadows, mingling with those of the descending night, fell athwart him that the cowboy looked up with a start.

"Oh!" exclaimed Pocut Pete, and then Bud and the others saw that he had a knife in his hand, and something else. Something that glistened when Old Billee struck a match to light his pipe. For the old cowboy had, long ago,

passed up the inevitable paper cigaret, and used the more sedate form of the weed.

"What's the idea?" asked Bud, and his question seemed to give Pocut Pete a chance to pull himself together, to answer with more coolness than he had exhibited by his first exclamation.

"This steer had some sort of a growth on his shoulder—like a wart," explained the cowboy. "I was just seeing if I could cut it off."

"You'd better be careful!" warned Old Billee.

"Why?" asked Pocut Pete so quickly that the other's remark might have well carried a threat, which, in the tone Billee used it, did not.

"You may get horned," went on the veteran cow puncher. For many of the cattle on the range of Bud and his cousins "wore their horns long," so to speak. Gradually the dehorning system was spreading through the west, but such an innovation, found to be most practical from all standpoints, took time to grow.

"Oh, this chap isn't dangerous," went on Pocut Pete with a laugh, closing his rather large pocket knife with a snap. "All the same, if you don't want me to snip off that wart I won't."

"I wouldn't," said Bud. "Not but what I'm glad to have you take an interest in the cattle," he went on, "but cutting one with a knife might bring on blood poisoning."

"Yes, an' jabbin' a knife into one might set

it wild, an' it would rush off an' start a stampede," said Billee.

"I realized that," admitted Pocut Pete, "so that's why I didn't do it until I got this steer off by himself."

He spoke this truly enough, for the lone animal he had been "operating" on was some distance from the main herd.

"I never saw a wart on a steer," spoke Bud, as he urged his pony nearer to where the strange cowboy stood on the ground close to the beef animal. "It's queer——"

There was a sudden movement. Pocut Pete leaped back and the steer, as though taking fright at Bud's advance, lowered its head, and, with a loud bellow, sprang away.

"I told you so!" called out Old Billee. "You might 'a' got horned, Pete!"

"Oh, I was watching," came the answer. "Yes, warts do, sometimes, come on cattle," he went on. "I've cut off lots of 'em. Some beef men won't pass 'em if they have any. I thought I was doing you a favor." He spoke in an injured tone of voice.

"Well, maybe you were," admitted Bud. "First I thought you were someone else."

"One of the Double Z bunch?" asked Pocut Pete with a laugh. "Did you find out anything over there?" he inquired as he caught his pony, which had been standing near-by, and leaped into the saddle.

"Nary a thing," voiced Old Billee.

And then, as the group, Pocut Pete included, headed back for camp, the old cowboy broke into song, roaring out:

"Send me a letter, kid,
Write it yo'self!
Put in some news of th' city.
For it's lonesome out here,
'Neath th' blue, starry sky,
An' cowboys don't get any pity!"

"What's struck you?" laughed Bud.

"Oh, I feel sorter so-so," affirmed Old Billee. "We're in for a storm, I reckon."

"And that's your weather indication!" chuckled Nort.

"Yeppy," agreed the veteran, and he broke into another verse of the interminable song—one of the series that cowboys love to warble.

"What do you think of Pocut Pete?" asked Dick of Bud in the seclusion of their own tent that night.

"Oh, I don't know what to think," was the answer. "I did have him down for a drinker, or a doper, but he doesn't seem to be either, and he does his work well. Only I don't know what to make of his actions to-night. Warts! On a steer! That sounded fishy to me!"

"Same here!" agreed Dick.

But as several days passed, and nothing more suspicious occurred, the action of Pocut Pete

was rather forgotten. Nor was there any further trouble with the rustlers, or the lack of water. In spite of the warnings and veiled threats that had been received, the black pipe still spouted into the reservoir.

And then, like lightning out of a clear sky, came a bolt that gave the boy ranchers a shock.

Old Billee riding in from off the distant range one day, called to Bud who was opening some of the reservoir gates to let water run to a distant trough for the cattle.

"Bad business, Bud!" exclaimed the veteran.

"What's that?" asked the lad, with an instinctive glance at the black pipe, whence the water spouted. His first thought was of that.

"There's five of your steers dead, over near the last water trough!" was the answer.

"Steers dead!" gasped Bud. "Rustlers?" he asked, quickly.

"Don't 'pear to be," Billee answered. "There isn't a mark on 'em. Maybe it's glanders. Better get Doc. Tunison right over."

Which Bud did, by telephone.

The veterinarian, who looked after the health of cattle in that vicinity, appeared in due season. Bud, with his cousins and Old Billee went out to where the dead cattle lay, now stiff and stark. Some buzzards flopped heavily off as the party approached.

"Hum!" mused Dr. Tunison as he began his examination. It did not take him long to com-

plete it. "I thought so," he remarked, as he looked at Bud.

"What is it?"

"Germs!" was the answer. "The epidemic's struck you, Bud!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ROPED!

LIKE a blow struck came that announcement to Bud Merkel. And to his chums and partners in their first small venture as boy ranchers on their own responsibility, the announcement of the veterinarian was staggering.

"Germs!" exclaimed Nort.

"Epidemic!" voiced Dick.

"Has it really struck here—the same disease that was among dad's cattle?" asked Bud, as though hoping there might be some mistake.

"It's here all right," went on Dr. Tunison, rising from his stooping position beside a dead steer. He looked about for a puddle of water in which to wash his hands, and, having completed the operation, using a disinfectant from a bottle he produced, he added: "Better fence off this puddle, Bud. If any of your other cattle happen to drink here they'll get the disease, too, and bump off."

That was his way of saying that the steers would die.

"I'll do that!" declared Bud. "We can cut the water off from this part of the range. But what causes the epidemic, Doc? Dad was careful not to send me any of his infected cattle from Square M, and he said you'd examined all that came, and they didn't have any of the trouble."

"They didn't," declared the veterinarian. "I examined them all, and nothing was wrong with them. But this epidemic is a germ disease, Bud, and we don't exactly know how the germs are carried. It may be something the cattle eat; the bunch grass or other fodder, in the water; or it may come out of the air. All we know is that certain germs, in some, as yet unknown, way, enter into the system of the steer. They get into the blood through the mouth or nostril, or perhaps from a scratch or cut. And once the germs are there, so rapid is the action that the animals die over night—as yours have done, and as your father's did."

"Has dad lost any more?" asked Bud.

"Not that I've heard of. In fact I thought by his action, in sending the healthy animals of his Square M herd here, and to his other ranches, that he'd gotten the best of it. But now the epidemic breaks out here. I can't understand it!"

The veterinarian stood looking down at the dead animal, while the buzzards patiently waited nearby for the feast they knew belonged

to them. Evidently they were not fearful of germs.

"What's that funny smell?" suddenly asked Nort.

"That? Oh, it's the smell characteristic of the disease," replied Dr. Tunison. "Not very pleasant. I got some of the pus on my hands—that's why I washed and disinfected them. Well, Bud, I'm afraid you're in for it!"

"You mean the epidemic may run through all my stock?" asked the boy rancher, anxiously.

"It may, and that's the reason I'm putting you on your guard. But let's hope for the best. We'll act promptly. Fence this place off, or don't let any more water here, where other cattle can drink from the pool, that must, of necessity, be contaminated, now that I washed my hands in it, if for no other reason. Also separate the other cattle into as many herds as you can handle. In this way, if the epidemic gets among one bunch, you don't stand to lose so many. This is about all you can do."

"No preventative measures?" asked Bud.

"No. If the cattle remain healthy they may resist the germs. Nature sometimes provides her own remedies. She'll have to, in a case like this, where so little is known about this malady that no cure is yet available to science."

"That sure is a funny smell—I don't like it!" said Nort again.

"No, it isn't very pleasant," agreed the veterinarian.

And then Bud, who had been in a serious, brown study seemed, for the first time, to become aware of the evil odor.

"That smell! That smell!" he cried. "I've smelled it before!"

"Not unless you came in contact with the germs," spoke Dr. Tunison. "Where did you smell it, Bud?"

But, as suddenly as he had spoken, Bud Merkel became silent. He seemed to be thinking deeply, and as he turned aside he said:

"Oh, maybe it was when Old Billee rode in to tell me he had seen these dead steers."

"Possibly," admitted the veterinarian. "The smell is very characteristic, as I said. But you'd better arrange to bury these animals, Bud."

"There isn't any danger—I mean to humans; is there?" Bud asked. "If there is we'll let 'em stay here. The buzzards will make short work of 'em."

"No, there's no danger to man, even in directly handling the germs. That has been proved," said Dr. Tunison. "But if you let the cattle lie here, and the buzzards eat 'em, in some manner the disease may be carried to your other cattle. Best bury 'em, and fence off this water-hole."

Which was done. So the evil-looking buz-

zards were deprived of a feast, and flapped mournfully away.

There were anxious days that followed the appearance of the epidemic among the cattle of the boy ranchers. I speak of the cattle as their own, and they were, in a sense. For though, of course, Mr. Merkel really owned Flume Valley, and put up the cash to start the boys in business, he had determined that they should run the place as though it was their own. They must stand or fall by what happened. It was the only real way to start them in the way of becoming cattlemen, he decided.

So, though the boys were young, possibly the youngest ranchers in that part of the west, they were in earnest and accepted all the responsibilities that went with the venture.

Bud was very thoughtful those anxious days. There was hard work for all, since dividing the doubled herds into small units meant that each cowboy, including Bud, Nort and Dick, had to look after a certain number day and night. But no one shirked, even Buck Tooth working unusually hard in addition to doing the cooking. Though Indian braves are, constitutionally opposed to labor, Buck Tooth made an ideal herdsman.

Not as much time was spent in camp as had formerly been the case, as the boy ranchers and their older helpers were more often out riding herd. But occasionally many of them gathered

at the tents to compare notes and "feed up," as Snake put it. His wound, received in the fight with the rustlers, had healed.

"Some day we'll have regular ranch houses here instead of just a camp," Bud said, as he was riding back one day to look after the herd he had assigned to himself.

"Oh, this isn't so bad," spoke Nort.

"Real jolly, I call it!" added Dick.

"If only the water supply keeps up, and no more epidemic comes, we'll be all right," Bud announced. "At the same time I can't be sure of either."

This was true. Though the water flowed merrily on since the time the lads had penetrated the length of the tunnel, there was always an uneasy feeling, on the part of the boy ranchers and their friends, that it might stop at any time.

"And when it dries up again," Bud declared, "I'm not going to be satisfied until I find out what makes it quit flowing!"

"That's the idea!" added Nort. "We'll solve the mystery!"

As the days passed, and no more cattle were found ill or dead from the epidemic, the hopes of the boy ranchers began to rise. Had they caught the malady in time? Could it be stamped out by the burial of the five steers? Time alone —and a longer time than had so far elapsed— could tell.

Bud, Nort and Dick each had charge of a

herd, the three bunches of cattle being pastured on adjoining areas of rich grass.

But the distances separating them were not so great but that Bud and his cousins could exchange visits. And it was on one of these occasions that there occurred something which cleared up, in part at least, the mystery hanging over Flume Valley.

The boy ranchers were about to part for the evening, having spent the afternoon together over "grub," cooking at an open fire; and Nort and Dick were preparing to ride back to their herds, Bud being on the ground, so to speak, where he would "bunk" for the night.

As they rode down into a little swale amid the gathering shadows of the night, a bunch of cattle moved uneasily along ahead of them, and as the steers parted there was disclosed in their midst the forms of a man and a horse.

"Who's that?" suddenly asked Dick.

"It isn't one of our boys," declared Nort.

Bud suddenly sat upright in his saddle. He breathed deeply, and then quickly spurred forward. His cousins saw him swinging his lariat around his head.

In an instant it went swishing through the air, and, a moment later, as the coils settled about the figure of a man who started to leap for his pony, Bud let out a yell, shouting:

"Roped! Roped, by Zip Foster!"

CHAPTER XIX

AN EXPEDITION IN THE DARK

THERE was a confusion of rope and man. Sock, Bud's pony, braced his feet, including the white one that gave him his name, and the lariat tightened. There was a scurrying among the cattle, and the lone pony, without a rider, galloped off.

Nort and Dick, taken by surprise, had reined their steeds to a stop when they saw Bud lassoing the unknown man, but now they spurred up to their cousin.

"What is it?" demanded Nort.

"Who is he?" Dick wanted to know.

At that instant a shot cracked, and the fast-gathering darkness was cut by a sliver of flame.

"Trying that, are you!" angrily shouted Bud, and he backed his pony quickly, pulling the roped man along the ground, until the prostrate figure let out a yell.

"My hands are up!" came desperately out of the darkness.

"They'd better be!" retorted Bud. "Can you get off and tie him, Nort?" the boy rancher

called to his cousin. "Get out your gun, Dick, and cover him! He's going to be a bad actor, I'm saying!"

"I'm through!" came the sullen response from the man on the ground. "My gun went off by accident."

"Such *accidents* aren't healthy around here," grimly spoke Bud. "Get at him, fellows!"

"Who is he?" asked Nort, as he slipped from his pony, throwing the reins forward and on the ground as notice that the animal was to stand.

"And what's that funny smell?" asked Dick. "It's like—like the time we found the five dead steers!"

"Yes, and there'll be more dead steers as the result of this!" said Bud, and there was a choking in his voice.

A moment later Dick and Nort were standing over the prostrate figure of Pocut Pete. His arms were bound firmly to his sides by the tight coil of the lariat, held taut by Bud, and the other boys could see that the cowboy's gun had slipped from its holster and lay some distance away from him. Nort picked up the gun, and then, with quick motions, he and Dick bound some coils of Bud's rope around the rascal's feet.

All the fight seemed taken out of him. Without his gun, down on the ground and his pony out of reach—he lacked all the prime requisites of a cowboy. There was no escape, covered as

he was by Bud, who had drawn his own .45, and Pocut Pete "jest natcherly caved in," as Old Billee described it later.

"Caught you at it, just as I thought I would!" said Bud, when Pete was bound and hoisted up on his horse by the boys.

"Go on! Get it over with," was the grim answer. "I know when the game is played out, and it was a dirty game from the start. I'd never have opened it only I was desperate for money, and he offered me a lot."

"I know who you mean," said Bud. "It sure *was* a dirty game; and the worst of it is that it isn't over yet. That epidemic may spread all through our stock!"

Pocut Pete returned no answer as the boys started with him in the direction of the camp.

"What was he doing—trying to cut more warts off your cattle?" asked Dick.

"Warts!" cried Bud indignantly. "He was infecting them with the germs of that disease! Don't you smell the rotten stuff?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Nort. "So *that's* the game?"

"Yes," spoke Bud bitterly. "I wish I'd acted sooner, when I began to suspect him! But I didn't think any one would play a trick like this—especially on some one who never had harmed him."

"Has he been infecting your cattle?" asked Nort.

"Sure!" answered Bud. "I've got the goods on him! He had some thin glass bottles, with some sort of germ-dope in them. He cut, or scratched, the cattle and poured this stuff in the sore. That's how my steers got it, and not from being infected by those dad sent over. Oh, it sure is a rotten game, just when we were starting, too!"

"He ought to be shot!" indignantly voiced Nort.

"Or strung up!" added Dick.

"I don't care what they do to him!" said Bud. "I'm going to turn him over to Old Billee and the boys!"

"Don't do that!" begged the bound figure of Pocut Pete. "They—they may lynch me. Take me right to the sheriff!"

"Too far," said Bud shortly. "I don't care what the boys do to you! I'm through!"

The prisoner vainly struggled with his bonds, but they held firm.

It need not be written that there was a surprised bunch of cow punchers who gathered in the camp of the boy ranchers a little later, when Pocut Pete was delivered to them. Indignant voices and looks were noted on all sides as his crime was recounted by Bud.

In brief it was this:

From the time of Pocut Pete's arrival Bud had taken a dislike to him, and had suspected him, wrongly it appeared now, of being an ad-

dict to some form of drug, slangily termed "dope." For he had found fragments of thin-glass bottles, and had discovered in part of a broken phial, the same evil-smelling mixture that, later, was associated with the diseased cattle.

Then Bud did not know enough of the danger to act promptly, and even when Pocut Pete was discovered, "cutting a wart off a steer," as he falsely said, Bud did not know what to make of that. An older person might have been suspicious enough to have acted with more promptness, but Bud, naturally, had lots to learn.

However, as appeared later, Pocut Pete had secured from some of the disease-killed cattle some pus, filled with millions of germs. This unpleasant mixture he kept in tiny phials.

How he learned that to inject some of this pus under the hide of a steer would infect the animal, not only causing it to die of the disease, but to transmit it to others, is not vital to the story. Sufficient that Pocut Pete did know this.

And he put his evil knowledge to evil use. He was caught by Bud, Nort and Dick in the very act of infecting some of Bud's steers. For when search was made in the morning, at the scene of the capture, broken bits of phials were discovered, some with that vile, yellow substance on them. And an inspection of the cattle showed several with cuts on their flanks,

into which cuts, it was assumed, the germs had been injected, or rubbed.

These animals were at once isolated, to determine what would happen to them. The ground near where Pocut Pete had carried on his nefarious operations was sprayed with disinfectants, and the cattle that had been with those he inoculated were also herded by themselves.

These were all the precautions that could be taken, and then Pocut Pete was hurried off to the nearest jail, there to await trial.

"But what set him up to such vile work?" asked Nort, when the prisoner had been taken from camp.

"What else but the desire of Hank Fisher to see our stock-raising experiment fail?" countered Bud. "This is the doing of those scoundrels at Double Z. I only wonder that Del Pinzo wasn't in on the game."

"He may be yet," said Dick.

"Well, we'll be on the watch from now on—doubly on the watch," asserted Bud. "They won't put anything like this over on us again!"

"Not if we know it!" joined in his cousins.

It could not be determined, for several days, what the turn would be in the case of the cattle into which Pocut Pete had injected germs of the disease. Dr. Tunison was sent for, but said he could do nothing more than had been done.

"You'll just have to wait and see how many

will die," he told Bud. "You've done all you could by isolation. And there's one thing in your favor. No more of your cattle have been infected by those five that first died. We caught that outbreak in time. And if it proves that Pocut Pete is the sole source of infection on your ranch, it means that only those he managed to cut in his last operation will die."

But it took time to determine this, and while waiting for the outcome something else happened which, though it seemed to involve tragedy at the time, really resulted in clearing up the mystery and ending the water fight at Diamond X.

One morning, about a week after the roping of Pocut Pete, when the boy ranchers and their friends were assembled in camp, preparatory to starting out on their rounds of riding herd, Buck Tooth, who had gone to the reservoir to fish, came running down to the tents much excited.

"He must have caught a big one!" commented Old Billee.

But it was not fish that had aroused the old Indian.

"Water stop! Water him stop all time!" he yelled.

"What's that?" shouted Bud. "Isn't the pipe running?"

"No run!" answered Buck Tooth briefly. "All gone!"

"More trouble!" commented Bud. And then, with a grim tightening of his lips, he added: "This time we'll get to the bottom of the mystery!"

There was no doubt about the fact that the water had stopped running. As they all raced up the sloping side of the reservoir they saw only a few drops trickling from the pipe.

"The third time—I'm going to make it the last if it's possible," declared Bud.

"What yo' aimin' t' do?" asked Old Billee.

"Go through the tunnel from end to end, and both sides, and see where the water vanished to," was the answer. "We'll get up a regular expedition this time, and maybe take a boat. We'll find out what it all means."

"I believe you're right," asserted Snake Purdee. "There's no use trying to work Flume Valley if the water supply is goin' to be cut off without notice. I'm with you, Bud!"

"So'm I!" shouted Yellin' Kid. "Whoop-ee! I'm a lone wolf an' this is my turn for makin' a noise! Whoopee!"

"Let's find out, first, if the water is coming into the pipe from the river," suggested Nort.

"You call up," begged Bud. "I'm going to get ready for this expedition. We'll have to start in the dark," he went on, referring to the black tunnel that stretched under Snake Mountain. "But we may come out into the light. Anyhow, we're going in!"

CHAPTER XX

INTO THE DEPTHS

PREPARATIONS for exploring the mysterious tunnel on this occasion were much more complete and elaborate than when Bud, Dick and Nort walked through it before. And they did not rush off in haste, the moment it was discovered that the water no longer came through the reservoir end of the pipe line that formed the beginning and end of the old underground stream course.

"There's water enough for nearly a week, anyhow," said Bud, in discussing their plans. "And if we can't discover the cause of the stoppage inside of that time, and get it turned on again, we may as well know that and give up Flume Valley as a bad job."

"That's right," chimed in Nort.

"The stoppage is inside the tunnel, that's sure," voiced Dick.

"Yes," answered his cousin. "The water is running in all right from the river."

This fact had been ascertained by telephone. The water was running freely from Pocut River

above the dam, and into the pipe that entered the side of the mountain.

Bud's father had been told of the situation, which followed so closely on the heels of the discovery of the evil acts of Pocut Pete.

"Doesn't this sort of set you fellows back so you want to give up ranching?" Mr. Merkel asked his son and nephews.

"Not a bit!" promptly answered Bud.

"We're going to stick!" added Nort.

"And find out what makes this water stop," contributed Dick. "We'll show up Hank Fisher, Del Pinzo and that other bunch of crooks, too!"

"I don't see how Hank could have had anything to do with this water stoppage," said Mr. Merkel. "Of course it may develop that he hired Pocut Pete to infect our cattle, but even that is doubtful. Those fellows are pretty cute. Anyhow, Pocut Pete is where he can't do any harm for some time. He won't be tried until fall.

"But it's my idea, boys, that this water stoppage is caused by some natural means. We are using an old underground river bed, you realize, and there may be what I'd call a 'hole' in it somewhere. The water that ought to come to you may drop down that hole."

"But why doesn't it do it all the while?" asked Dick.

"That's one of the mysteries," said his uncle, "one that you'll have to solve."

"We went over it all before," spoke Bud, "and we couldn't see even a branch passage."

"Well, some of the men are going with you this time," his father said. "They're more used to looking for signs than you fellows are, though I must say you've done fine, so far!"

As Mr. Merkel had stated, it was decided to send several of the cowboys with Bud and his cousins on this expedition into the dark tunnel. Old Billee, Yellin' Kid and Snake Purdee would be of the party, which would thus consist of six.

In this way, there being safety in numbers, it was hoped that accidents might be avoided, or, if they happened, there would be at hand help for the unfortunates.

"If we could only take a boat," said Dick, when the preparations were almost completed, "it would be great!"

"What could we do with a boat in that stream, which is hardly three feet wide in places?" asked his brother. A boat had been mentioned in the first excitement, however, but the idea was abandoned as impracticable.

"Well, if the flood came, as suddenly as it did when we had to take refuge on the ledge, we could float out," answered Dick.

"A boat to hold six men would be too big to carry," spoke Bud. "Even a folding canvas

one wouldn't answer. But I know what we can do."

"What?" asked Nort.

"We can each take an inner automobile tire. Blown up, they are as good as life preservers, and with them fastened to us we can float and be carried along by the current, if a flood happens again."

It was decided that this was a wise precaution to take, and from Diamond X some inner tubes were sent over—old ones that had outlived their usefulness on the car, but which still held air, and would, as Bud said, make excellent life preservers.

In order to make a thorough examination it was decided to take food and water enough to last the expedition at least two days. It was easy to traverse the tunnel in one day, as the boys had proved. But Old Billee counseled a slower trip.

"I wish I could go with you," said Mr. Merkel to the boys, when the time came for the start, "but I have a shipment of steers to get off, and I want to keep watch of this epidemic. It begins to look as if we had gotten the best of it, but I'm taking no chances."

"Oh, we'll make out all right, Dad," spoke Bud. "Though we would like to have you with us. And when we come back we'll either settle, for good and all, this fight for water, or we'll abandon Flume Valley!"

"I'd hate to see you give it up," said the ranchman. "It is an ideal place to raise cattle, with the water here. But without it, of course, there's no use thinking of it. Well, good luck to you," he called, as he turned to go back to Diamond X proper.

As he had said, there had been no further outbreak of the epidemic among the cattle of the boy ranchers. The steers which Pocut Pete had cut, injecting into them the pus and germs, died, however. And there were more of these than Bud and his cousins had counted on.

But if they lost no more than this half-score, and could get the water back, all might yet be well.

The water in the reservoir had gone down several feet when the expedition started into the tunnel. Much of the fluid had to be drawn off to water the thirsty cattle, for it was the height of summer now, and the heat, in the middle of the day, was terrific.

But there was still enough of the supply to last for several days. Then, if Bud and his companions could not discover the secret of the stoppage, and get the water to running again. Flume Valley would have to be abandoned.

"Well, I can't see that we can do any more," spoke Bud.

"No; you've got things as well fixed as possible," agreed Old Billee.

"Can't tell when you'll see us again," said

Dick to the remaining cowboys gathered about the reservoir end of the tunnel to see the expedition start in.

"Well, good luck, anyhow!" came the answer.

A number of punchers had been sent over to Flume Valley from Diamond X and Triangle B to replace Yellin' Kid, Billee and Snake Purdee who were to accompany the boy ranchers.

Suddenly Yellin' Kid broke into song:

"Leave me alone with a rope an' a saddle,
Fold my spurs under my haid!
Give me a can of them sweet, yaller peaches,
'Cause why? My true-love is daid!"

"Oh, give us something cheerful!" laughed Bud, as the cowboy seemed about to start on another verse.

"That's cheerful enough for this occasion," retorted Yellin' Kid. "Wait 'till you hear me howl in that tunnel."

"Don't!" begged Dick with a laugh. "It echoes so you'll bring the roof down!"

There was a hurried inspection of their weapons and supplies, for each was equally needed. The inner tubes of several auto tires had been provided and tested, and there was a small air pump with which to inflate them.

"All ready?" asked Bud, at length.

"All ready," answered Old Billee. "But I wish I had a hoss!"

"Couldn't use one," retorted Snake Purdee. "It'll work off some of the fat, if you walk."

"Hu! Fat!" snorted Old Billee. "I ain't fat!"

"Forward!" suddenly called Bud.

Then with waves of their hands, and with the calling of many "good-bye" farewells, the expedition disappeared into the black depths of the tunnel.

What would they find? What would be the outcome? Would they ever reappear again?

These were questions which more than one asked himself, but no one spoke them aloud.

"Now," remarked Bud, when they were well within the long stretch of blackness, and lanterns had been lighted, "we walked, the other time, on the left-hand side of the water course. What say we try the right one this time?"

"Good enough!" decided Old Billee. "We'll be right for once!" he joked.

"But it really is a good idea," declared Snake Purdee. "There might have been something—some hidden passage on the side you didn't travel, boys. You could easily have missed it in the darkness."

So this was decided on. As a matter of fact in many places it was possible for the party to divide and some walk along either side of the old stream bed. But this would not be feasible should the water suddenly appear again.

And so the expedition moved slowly along.

I say slowly, for that speed marked their course. They carried a number of lanterns and these were flashed over walls and roof as well as on the bottom, to discover, if possible, a branch tunnel, or hole, where the water might travel to, and thus be shunted off from the reservoir end.

But, for several hours nothing occurred, and nothing was discovered. Lunch was eaten in the blackness, relieved as it was only by the lanterns, and then the expedition started off again.

"Here's the place where we were when the water came spouting before," said Bud, as they came opposite the ledge on which he and his cousins had taken refuge. "I think we ought to spend some time here and——"

"Hark," suddenly interrupted Nort. "Hear that noise!"

They all heard it—a rushing, roaring sound, like the blowing of a mighty wind.

"The water—the water!" cried Bud. "Look out!"

They could hear the noise more plainly, now, and as Snake and Billee raised their lanterns, the glows flashed on a white, frothy mass approaching through the blackness of the tunnel.

"It's the same as before!" cried Nort. "Get to the ledge! The ledge!"

He made a leap, running ahead to where he saw a more narrow place that would enable him

to leap across from the right to the left side of the channel.

And then, while the others hung back for a moment, and Nort thus dashed ahead alone, his companions saw him quickly disappear. The wall of water suddenly rushed forward, but it never came quite to the place where the party of five now stood in nameless terror—five, for Nort had disappeared into the depths of the stream that had so mysteriously appeared again out of the blackness.

From whence it came, and whither it was rushing, not to foam entirely over that startled group, none in it could say. But it had engulfed Nort—that they had seen.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIGURE ON THE ROCK

HORROR and surprise held the five speechless for a moment. Then, as they heard the noise of the rushing water, and saw, by the light of their lanterns, that it came almost to them, but suddenly turned to the right, they came to their senses.

"Nort! Nort!" yelled Dick, his voice being flung back at him in echoes from the rocky, vaulted roof of the tunnel.

"What in th' world happened?" asked Old Billee in trembling accents.

"Nort fell into the stream, and was carried away," answered Bud, his voice choking.

"But why doesn't the water reach us?" asked Snake.

"That's what we'll have to find out," asserted Bud, bravely. "Come on!"

"But be careful," cautioned Billee. "Something may happen t' us, an' then we can't help Nort! Go easy!"

He spoke only in time, for the next moment, with an exclamation of horror, Bud and Dick, who had forged ahead, recoiled back.

"Look out!" shouted Bud, and he made such a lurch backward to recover his balance that the lantern was flung from his hand. It dropped, as they all could see, into the midst of black, swirling waters, white foam-capped on top.

And it was into this stream that Nort had fallen and been carried away, and into this stream that Bud and Dick had been nearly precipitated as they dashed forward.

Bud's lantern was extinguished with a hiss as the waters penetrated it and covered the wick. It sank from sight, but not before it had, in a flash, illuminated the surface of the water.

"It's a good thing we took the right-hand side," said Billee, as he and the others saw what it was that had caused the water to rush almost to their feet and then branch off. "I mean it's a good thing, for it may help us to solve the mystery. But as for poor Nort——"

He did not finish, but Dick sent up a despairing cry:

"Nort! Oh, Nort! Where are you?"

And only the vaulty echoes answered.

"What are we going to do?" asked Snake, who seemed unable to suggest anything.

"Everybody come here with their lanterns," directed Bud. "And light that spare one, Billee."

Thus was replaced the one he had dropped in

the effort to save himself from falling into the same torrent that had engulfed his cousin.

And in the light of the lanterns, the one Nort had carried being forever lost, it seemed they all could see the explanation for the apparently mysterious action of the underground stream; or, rather, it was an explanation of part of the mystery; for this was only the beginning.

Beyond where they stood, in the direction of Pocut River, there flowed through the ancient channel a body of water larger than that which usually filled the underground course. This was accounted for, likely, by the fact that it had been stopped, or dammed, by some natural or artificial means, and had suddenly been released. Thus the channel was more fully filled than usual.

But, as I have said, the water came up to the point where the members of the expedition then stood. From there it made a sudden turn to their right, as they stood facing the river end of the tunnel. And it was this sudden turn—this shift in the course of the underground stream—which prevented it from engulfing our friends.

But it had engulfed Nort.

"I see what happened—or, at least, part of it," spoke Bud while the others listened. "The waters were suddenly turned on again, or turned themselves on, and shot this way. Nort heard them and ran down here to jump across the

stream-bed, which was then dry. But he must have fallen over the edge of this traverse ledge, or channel, as I nearly did, and down he went!"

They looked, and agreed that this was very likely how it had taken place.

"But can't we save him?" pleaded Dick. "I'm a good swimmer. Let me try to get him! Maybe he's lying down there—on the bottom!"

He made as if to take off his coat, but Old Billee grabbed him by the arm.

"You'd only go t' your death, boy!" said the old ranchman hoarsely. "It's bad enough —as it is!"

"But what happened to Nort?" asked Dick, and there was a sob in his voice.

"He must have been carried away—down that stream—wherever it goes," asserted Snake Purdee.

"That's just the point, where does it go?" Dick asked.

"Wait a minute," counseled Bud. "Let's see if we can reason this out." He paused to give it thought. "The way this stream is running now," he resumed, "wouldn't put any water into our reservoir, would it?"

"No," answered Yellin' Kid, and for once his voice was softened. "Th' water is all being shunted down this passage—where Nort fell."

"But," resumed Bud, "this passage has always been here. We didn't see it before, as we walked on the other side of the main channel.

Then if this side channel has always been here, and we managed to get water through our pipe when it was here, it stands to reason that it must fill in time, enabling the water to run along here," and he indicated the regular channel that extended back of them out toward Flume Valley.

"That's so!" cried Old Billee. "There's an end, or a bottom, t' this channel somewhere, and poor Nort can't be carried all the way through th' earth."

"But—but," faltered Dick. "It may be too late to save him when this side passage fills up."

"What I was going to propose," went on Bud, "is that we see if we can't follow along this newly-discovered side passage, as we have been following the main bed of the underground river."

He paused to let his companions visualize this suggestion.

"Do you think that would be safe?" asked Old Billee. "I mean," he added quickly, "will that be th' safest way t' try an' save Nort? I won't back down on anything—I guess you know that—but I was just wondering if there was some other way."

"There might be," said Bud. "We could go along on the left side of the stream, and see if there is a crossing place farther on. We saw some narrow places when we were here be-

fore, but it's a question how much water they'd have in them now."

"Oh, but can't we do something?" cried Dick, now almost sobbing, though he was making a brave effort to conquer himself. "Oh, Nort! Nort! Where are you?" he cried frenziedly.

But again only the echoes answered.

"Come on!" cried Old Billee suddenly. "We'll try this way. We've got t' do something!"

"Leave our packs here," suggested Yellin' Kid, and again his voice was low, as if in deference to Dick's feelings. "We can put 'em up on that ledge," he added, indicating a small one on their side of the underground stream. "The water doesn't appear to have been up there in years. If we leave our things here we'll be better able to help Nort—if we find him," he added in a voice so low that only Old Billee heard.

"Take our lanterns," suggested Snake Purdee.

"And ropes," went on Bud. "We may need 'em!"

Accordingly the food and other supplies, which the searchers after the secret of the underground water course had brought with them, were put up on the ledge, and then they started down the black passage through which the stream appeared to have branched, carrying Nort with it. There was room but for one

to walk at a time on this "bank," as it might be called, of the hidden stream, and they had to proceed in single file.

"I'd like to see a map of this place, so we'd know where we were going," spoke Old Billee, as he swung his lantern from side to side in an endeavor to disclose the hidden secrets of the place.

"I have an idea that the underground stream is shaped like the letter T," spoke Bud. "The top, or cross stem, is the part that extends from the river to our reservoir. We are now walking along the upright piece."

"But if the main part of the T is also a stream, and the water is running down that, as it is, instead of along the main stem, it becomes for the time being a letter L, doesn't it?" asked Snake.

"Yes," assented Bud. "And as long as the water turns at right angles, as it does at the place where Nort fell in, and as long as the water runs along this same side passage, we don't get any at Flume Valley. The letter T is in our favor, and L is against us."

"But we didn't see anything like this when we were here before," remarked Dick.

"Because we weren't on this side," Bud answered. "And I have an idea that, in time, this second passage finally fills with water completely, and when it does the stream again flows along the cross stem of the T and we get it."

"Mebby you're right," Old Billee agreed. "But this isn't finding Nort."

"Will we—will we ever find him?" faltered Dick.

"Sure!" declared Bud, as heartily as he could.

But as they progressed in the darkness, stopping now and then to look about by means of the light, calling again and again, and as no reply came, even the heart of the stoutest of them sank in despair.

All they could see was black, rushing water, flowing in a channel it appeared to have cut, after countless years, in the solid rock. There was a narrow footpath, so to speak, on either side of this stream, and it was along this the searchers were walking.

Suddenly Bud, who was in the lead, uttered a strange cry.

"What's the matter?" exclaimed Dick. "Do you see him?"

"No! But look!" went on Bud. "We have come out into a regular underground cave! It's as big as a house!"

He flashed his lantern around in a circle, and as the others came up and stood beside him, at a spot where the passageway beside the stream widened, they saw that they had emerged into a great vault.

And as they stood there, awed and marveling, there came to them, above the rustle and whis-

pering of the rushing waters, the sound of a human voice—it was as though someone, sorely hurt, had moaned.

"Listen!" cried Dick.

"Hold up your lanterns!" commanded Bud sharply.

As they raised them, throwing the combined light farther out across the stream that had widened into a pool in the vault, Dick uttered a cry.

"I see him! I see Nort!" yelled Dick. "There, on the rock!"

And he pointed to the huddled figure of some one on a great rock in the middle of the pool of black water, which seemed, a short distance from the inflowing stream, to be as quiet as a lake. And, as they watched in the gleam of the lights, the figure on the rock moved slightly.

"Nort! Nort!" cried Dick, and his voice was flung back in deafening echoes from the vaulted roof.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WATER GATE

WHILE they eagerly watched, the solitary figure on the big rock in the midst of that sinister pool again moved slightly, and as it became partly erect it was seen to be Nort Shannon.

"We've found him! We've found him!" joyfully cried Dick.

"An' alive, too, if I'm any judge," added Billee.

Dick was stripping off his coat, when Bud placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Wait a minute," advised the western lad.

"But I'm going to get him!" objected the brother. "I'm going to save Nort!"

"Maybe it isn't safe, and we may be able to save him in another way," suggested Bud. "I say, Nort," he called. "Are you hurt?"

How eagerly they all waited for the answer, after the echo of Bud's voice had ceased reverberating in the big cave!

"Yes—I—I'm all right," came the faint answer across the silent pool. "I don't know

exactly how I got here. Something hit me on the head—after I fell—fell in. I reckon I must have floated near this rock and—and just naturally grabbed hold and—pulled myself—up!"

"That's enough! Take it easy now!" called Bud. "We're coming over to get you!"

"Sure you're not hurt?" asked Dick, his voice trembling.

"Nothing more than a bump on the head," answered Nort, his own tones stronger now. "Not half as bad as I've gotten at football," and he laughed a little—the most joyful sound any of them had heard since the sweeping away of the boy rancher.

"Well, now we've found him, the next thing is to get him over here," spoke Bud. "Two of us had better swim out there. This water looks to be all right," and he stooped down and tested it with his hand. "As warm as the river," he added.

"I'm going to swim out!" declared Dick, and this time, as he began to "peel," no one stopped him.

"I'll go with you," said Bud. "We'll tie the ropes around our waists and they can hold them here on shore. It will be better than taking a risk, using the old tires," he added, "and, while there isn't any current in the pool now, no telling what may happen."

"Sure you want the ropes," said Old Billee.

"But you'd better take a tire for Nort," and they did.

"Hold hard, Nort!" called Dick, as he and Bud took off their clothes in preparation for the swim. "We're coming!"

"I'll hold hard all right," came the answer back across the pool. "And there's something hard here to hold on to, all right."

They did not then realize his meaning, but they understood, later, when they made a most amazing discovery.

In a few minutes Dick and Bud were in the water, lariats held by those on "shore" tied around their waists; and the two boy ranchers were swimming toward the big rock in the middle of the pool. Lanterns at the edge of this strange underground body of water gave sufficient light to enable the swimmers, and the others, to see Nort now standing on the great boulder which emerged from the midst of the black water.

It was the plan of Bud and Dick to help Nort to swim back to where the others stood, they supporting him on either side. For though Nort was a better swimmer than his brother, in his weakened condition, hit on the head as he had said, he might suddenly collapse.

So also might Bud and Dick, or there might suddenly appear a swift current in the now quiet pool—that is, quiet beyond where the

stream flowed in—and in that latter event the lariats would serve to pull them all to safety.

"Gee! I thought you were a goner!" gasped Dick, as he climbed out and clasped his brother by the hand.

"I would have been, only that I floated near this rock, and managed, half unconscious as I was, to grab hold of a projection and pull myself up," Nort answered. "That water came up so fast it scared me, and I slipped right into it."

"We saw you," said Bud, sitting down on the rock to get his wind, so he might be at his best in helping Nort on the return journey.

"It was—awful!" spoke Dick simply, and then he made no further reference to his mental agony.

"Well, are you ready to go back?" asked Bud, after a pause, in which interim they had called to those across the pool that the lost lad was all right.

"I'm ready, yes," was Nort's answer. "But I'd sort of like to see what this hard lever-like object is."

"Oh, yes," spoke Dick. "You said you had something hard to hold to. Let's have a look—if we only had a light," he added, for it was quite dark on the great rock in the midst of the black pool. The light of the lanterns did not brightly penetrate that far.

"I have some matches, in a waterproof case,

if I didn't lose it out of my pocket," said Nort, feeling in his soaking trousers. "Here they are," he went on a moment later. And as his hands were drier than those of Bud or Dick, Nort opened the box and managed, after one or two failures, to strike a light.

As the little taper flared up the three boys on the rock saw, standing upright about in the centre of the large boulder a great handle, or lever, of copper. The metal gleamed dully red in the flickering light.

"What is it?" asked Bud, as Nort struck another light.

"I don't know," was the answer from Nort. "I discovered it when I was crawling about and feeling around. I thought, if worst came to worst, I could hold to this if the waters rose."

"They seem to be as high as they're going to get," said Bud. "But this sure is queer! Hold your match closer, Nort."

Another of the tapers was lighted, and across the pool came the voice of Snake Purdee, asking what was going on.

"There's some sort of a handle, or lever, here," answered Bud, as he examined it more closely. "It moves, too," he added as he laid his hands on it and pulled it toward him.

"Look out!" cautioned Dick, but it was too late.

Bud had pulled the copper lever toward him, and, in spite of its size and weight, it moved

easily in what appeared to be a slot in the rock. It clicked slightly, as though connected with hidden mechanism.

Then, with a suddenness that was startling, a low but ever-increasing roar seemed to fill the cavern in which was the black pool. The roar grew louder and louder, and the very rock beneath their feet seemed to tremble.

"What have you done?" gasped Dick.

"Search me!" answered Bud in such queer tones that Nort laughed.

And then a strange thing happened. As Nort struck another match he and the boys on the rock could see the water all about them beginning to recede. Slowly it flowed at first and then, with a rush, it began running out of the place as fast as it had run in.

"What's up over there?" called the voice of Old Billee from "shore," so to speak. "What you fellers doin' with th' water?"

"I just pulled that lever," sang out Bud.

"Then you've done the trick!" said the old cowboy. "You must have opened some gate, and the water's running away. Better swim over here while you have the chance. When the water comes back that rock may be covered!"

But another strange part of their mysterious adventures was that they did not have to swim back. For the water receded so rapidly that, in a little while, it was possible to wade from the rock to the stone edge of the pool where the

other members of the party stood. And wade back to their friends Bud, Dick and Nort did.

"Oh, boy! But we're glad to see you!" cried Old Billee, as he caught Nort by the hand.

"You let out a mouthful that time!" declared Yellin' Kid, and his voice nearly split their ear drums, so magnified was it by the echoing, vaulted roof of the cavern.

"But what all happened?" asked Snake Purdee. "Is there some old Mexican grain mill under here that has a water-wheel, sluices and gates?"

"I give it up," answered Bud. "All I know is that I pulled that copper lever—and it's copper so it won't rust off, I reckon—and the water began to rush out as fast as it must have come in here."

"It is mighty queer," agreed Old Billee. "Let's go take a look," and he started to walk across the intervening space between shore and the great rock—a space in which only a few puddles of water now remained.

"Will it be safe?" asked Bud, who had begun to dress, an example followed by Dick.

"Why not?" asked Old Billee. "The water can't rise any higher than it was when you fellows were on the rock. An', according to your tell, there's room enough for us all t' stand there."

"Yes, it's big enough," agreed Bud. "But

suppose we all get there, and the water begins to come back?"

"We'll turn it loose again with th' lever," answered the old cow puncher. "But I reckon it can't fill up this pool again until that lever is shifted back where it was before you yanked it."

"Maybe not," admitted Bud. "Well, let's take a chance. If worst comes to worst we can swim back, and I'd like to solve this mystery. I feel that we're getting at it now!"

"That's right," said Nort, who was feeling stronger every moment. "When I fell in, and was carried away," he said, "I had a wild notion that this might lead to the discovery of something. I managed to keep my head out of water as I was swept along, until I got a knock on the noodle, and that put me partly to sleep. That may have been a good thing, too, for they say a partly unconscious person doesn't breathe much, and that's why I didn't swallow any water to speak of.

"I was dazed when I must have been swept, or floated, past that rock but I came to in time to save myself. Gosh! but I was glad to hear you yell though, Dick!" he said.

"Well, let's get over there an' start pryin' out this secret," suggested Old Billee. "This is gettin' mighty interestin'!"

It seemed reasonable to suppose that the water would rise to no greater height than it

had when the searchers had discovered Nort on the rock. And as this boulder was well out of water, and large enough for them all to stand on, they would run no risk, even if the flood should start to return when they were in the middle of the pool, which, however, was a pool no longer, but merely a wet reservoir, so to speak.

"But I don't believe the water will flow back here until you shift that lever again, Bud," declared the old ranchman. "And I'm going to have a try at it!"

"Isn't it takin' a chance?" asked Snake.

"You got t' take chances in this world!" declared Old Billee.

"Well, let's go!" suggested Bud.

"I think I'll stay here," spoke Nort. "I don't feel quite up to walking over those rocks. And you may need some one on this side who can throw a rope," he added, as he looked at the lariats.

"All right," assented Bud. "You stay here, Nort."

They left him on the shore, as I call the rocky edge of the pool, with a lantern, and, taking other lanterns with them, the little party set out. It took them only about three minutes to walk across to the great rock, which stood upright in the middle of the cavern floor.

Rising up in almost the very centre was the heavy, copper lever. By the light of the lan-

terns it was examined, and seen to extend down through the rock, whither no one knew.

"It works a water gate all right," declared Old Billee. "Let's pull it back to where you found it, Bud, and see what happens."

It was with some feelings of apprehension that the others watched as Old Billee reached for the copper lever and pulled it toward him. It operated as easily as it had for Bud.

And almost as quickly as had taken place on the other occasion, there was that roaring, rumbling sound, a noise as of the blowing of a great wind, and then the waters began to rush back into the pool.

"Here they come!" yelled Dick, as he stood beside Bud on the rock.

Truly the waters were returning as the hidden gate was closed when Billee pulled the lever.

Would they go down again?

That was what each one asked himself.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CONSPIRATORS

RAPIDLY rushing, foaming, bubbling and boiling, the waters rushed into the mysterious cavern, until they again filled the pool across which Bud and Dick had swam to the rescue of Nort on the rock. Now the situation was reversed. It was Nort who was on the mainland, or shore, so to speak, and the others who were on the rock.

But it was one of their own choosing, in an endeavor to solve the mystery, though as Bud and his companions watched the waters creeping higher and higher up the surface of the rock on which they stood, their hearts were not altogether easy.

"Suppose it covers the rock?" asked Dick.

"Then we'll have to swim back where Nort is," Bud answered.

"Shucks! You won't have to do nothin' of the sort!" declared Old Billee stoutly. "She won't come up any farther than it did before!"

And he was right. When the water around the rock lapped the erosion mark, which had

been worn in the hard stone by centuries of the flow of the fluid, the flood ceased. The roaring, bubbling and seething, like that which takes place in a canal lock, came to an end, and the water of the pool became quiet.

"There! What'd I tell you?" cried Old Billee. "I closed th' water gate, that Bud opened to let th' water out, an' she come back. Now all we have t' do, so we can walk back, is t' yank this lever again."

"Does it only work two ways?" asked Yellin' Kid, his voice again softened, as the mystery of the place seemed to cast a shadow over him and the others.

"Seems to," Bud answered, holding his lantern down close to where the copper handle entered the rock.

There appeared to be a slot cut in the hard stone—a slot about three inches wide, and a foot long, in which the copper lever could be moved backward and forward, but not from side to side.

"Let's try the other way, now," suggested Dick.

Once again Old Billee pulled on the copper shaft, which, as they could see by the light of all their lanterns combined, seemed to have been rudely hammered out, for it bore the rough marks of a primitive forge.

And no sooner had the lever been pulled to its limit in the slot than there sounded again

the rushing, roaring tumult of noises, and, after a little, the water began receding once more.

"We've discovered the secret!" cried Dick.

"No, only part of it," said Bud. "We've got to find where the water goes, and if pulling this lever sends it into our reservoir. That's the main thing to discover."

"But we're on the track of part of it," went on Dick. "I wonder who built this secret water gate, and the lever that operates it?"

"It may be part of the work of the ancient Mexicans, the old Indians or the Aztecs, who inhabited this land ages ago," said Bud. "Copper will last almost forever, you know, even in water, as it doesn't rust. And you've read how the ancient Aztecs used to build great vaults under the mountain, and arrange to flood them to keep their gold away from the Spaniards."

"Yes, I've read of that," admitted Dick.

"Say, where can you get a book like that?" demanded Old Billee.

"I've got one at the camp," Bud answered. "I'll let you take it. Of course my theory may be all wrong," he went on. "But I begin to believe we've stumbled on some ancient Aztec water system."

"You don't mean to say those old Mexicans, for that's what the Aztecs were, are still hanging around in this cave, turning your water on and off, do you?" demanded Dick.

"No, it's some one more modern who's mak-

ing trouble for us," Bud declared. "But we're on the track of a big discovery, I believe. Look, the water is almost gone!"

This was true. The pool was emptying itself as it had done before, and, in a short time they could walk back to where Nort awaited them.

"What's the next thing to do?" asked Dick.

"Get back where we left our grub and feed our faces," suggested Snake Purdee.

"Yes, I think that will be best," Bud said. "Then we can talk over the next move. I begin to feel hungry."

"I hope we won't be disappointed," remarked Yellin' Kid and his vocal powers seemed to be on the mend, for he called loudly.

"Disappointed? How?" asked Old Billee.

"I mean I hope we find our grub where we left it," Kid explained.

"Why wouldn't it be there?" Old Billee wanted to know. "Do you think them Hatchet-texts have sneaked in and took it?"

"You mean Aztecs?" laughed Yellin' Kid. "No, I wasn't referrin' to them. I mean I hope our monkeyin' with that copper handle didn't send the flood over the place where we left our things."

"I never thought of that," said Bud. "By Zip Foster! I hope nothing like that *has* happened!"

With anxious hearts they hastened back to the place where Nort had been swept away.

They had left the strange lever set to drain the pool, and what state of affairs they would find on returning to their point of digression no one could say.

"Maybe we'll find the water running on into Flume Valley," suggested Nort, who seemed to be almost himself again, except for a feeling of weakness.

"I hope so," spoke Bud.

But this was not the case. On reaching the place where the tunnel branched, they found no water there at all. None was running in the main channel, and none was turning off down the "stem of the T," to use the illustration I first employed.

"Keeps on being strange, doesn't it?" said Bud.

They all agreed with him.

"What's the next move?" asked Dick, as they gazed about, finding their food and supplies safe, and no water, to mention, anywhere about.

"Let's grub!" suggested Snake.

"And make a fire and heat the coffee," urged Bud. "I don't believe the smoke will do any harm, and there's plenty of dry driftwood in the higher places, and on little ledges."

"Some hot coffee would go down mighty well!" remarked Nort.

"Then you're going to have it!" asserted his cousin. They had brought some of the cold

beverage along in tin flasks, and these were soon heating over a little blaze that was kindled along the bank of the underground stream that was again dry.

The food and hot drink put new hearts into all of them, especially Nort, and when appetites were appeased they gathered about the cheerful, if small, blaze, which gave off scarcely any smoke, and held a discussion.

"What I think we had better do," said Bud, "is to travel on until we come to the place—if such a place there is—where this stream again shunts off to the side. For I'm sure there is such a place if we find that the water is running into the tunnel from the river."

"We can't be sure of that, though," Old Billee said.

"No, but we can find out when we get to the other end of the tunnel," declared Bud. "My idea is—though, of course, I might be wrong—that there are two side passages, so to speak. Sometimes the water branches off the main channel and fills the pool where we found Nort on the rock. Then it may flow down another channel, farther on, but nearer to the river end of the tunnel."

"But if the water came along the main channel, until it got here, and then filled the pool to the limit, as was evidently the case," suggested Nort, "why wouldn't the water then back up

and go on to our reservoir—and it didn't do that."

"There may be some outlet from that pool and cavern where we were," said Bud.

They considered this for a moment, and agreed that he might be right.

"Then what we've got to look for," went on Bud, "is another side passage where the water is shunted off, that is, providing it is not cut off at the river pipe. And if there is such a passage it must be on the right-hand side of the stream, as was the one where Nort fell in. For we went all along the left-hand bank the other time, and didn't discover anything."

"And suppose we find the second branch stream now—what will we do?" asked Snake.

"Two of us will come back and work the lever, while the others stay at the second stream to see what happens," was Bud's answer. "Come on; let's go!"

They put out the fire, packed their belongings, and, making sure that Nort was able to travel, they set out again. Nort's garments were soaking wet, or, rather, they had been, but there was a current of warm air in the tunnel, and soon he began to dry out, for which he was very thankful.

They found the second branching stream sooner than they expected. It was less than a quarter of a mile from the first, or the one

into which Nort had fallen, and it was almost of exactly the same character.

"Look out! Here it is!" cried Bud who saw it first, his lantern gleaming on the swiftly-rushing water. "Go easy!"

And "easy" they went, reaching the edge of the ledge below which flowed the mysterious, powerful current.

"We can go along here, just as we did before. Here's another branch tunnel!" announced Dick, holding up his lantern, and showing a wide, high passage, the bottom and middle part of which was occupied by the stream.

"I wonder how many of them there are?" remarked Nort as he and the others turned into the black opening, which seemed to slope as though descending a hill. This gave greater force to this stream of water.

"And I wonder if it also runs into a cavern, with a rock and a copper lever in the middle?" voiced Dick.

"Hope we find out soon," spoke Bud. "This is getting more and more queer all the while."

They tramped on in the blackness that was relieved only by their swaying lanterns. They walked beside the strange, underground stream, and they had progressed farther than along the other branching body of water when Old Billee, who was ahead just then, suddenly halted and uttered a warning.

"Listen!"

"What is it?" asked Yellin' Kid, in his usual tones, but Billee reached back and gave him such a dig in the ribs that Kid subsided with a grunt.

"I hear talkin'!" whispered Billee. "Voices! There's some one else in this place than us! Listen!"

They stopped and strained their sense of hearing. And then, above the slithering murmur of the water, they all distinctly heard a voice say:

"I think we've fixed 'em this time! They won't steal any more water from Pocut River!"

The boy ranchers looked at each other.

"Del Pinzo!" whispered Nort.

"As sure as Zip Foster ever ate ham and eggs!" agreed Bud.

"Hush!" begged Old Billee.

And as they became quiet again they heard another voice say:

"I guess it's all up with 'em now. We might as well light out and touch off the fuse!"

"Whew!" softly whistled Bud.

Together the party of searchers moved softly forward. Suddenly the passage along the bank of the mysterious stream turned sharply, almost at a right angle.

And there, in what appeared to be a small cave, excavation or cavern, high in the upper wall was disclosed a roughly circular opening, like a window or port hole. Through this port

hole a light showed, and outlined in the light were several rough-appearing men, leaning together over what might have been a table.

"Del Pinzo!" murmured Dick.

"Conspirators!" exclaimed Bud. "They're the ones that's been turning this water on and off! We're on the track of the mystery now!"

Whether he spoke loudly enough to be heard, or whether some other sound made by the searchers alarmed the men in the upper niche, was not disclosed just then.

But the light suddenly went out, and confused sounds followed.

And chief among these sounds was the rushing, roaring noise, the blowing as of a mighty wind, and the water near the boy ranchers and their companions was strangely agitated.

CHAPTER XXIV

A POWERFUL STREAM

"BETTER look out!" came the high-pitched voice of Yellin' Kid.

"There may be a flood here!" added Old Billee.

"Can't we get those rascals?" cried Snake Purdee. "I'd 'a' had th' drop on 'em in another second if they hadn't doused that glim!"

As he spoke they could all hear the rush of iron-nailed shoes when the wearers of them scrambled over hard rocks in their effort to escape.

Mingled with that sound was the strange one of rushing water. Realizing that danger might come to them more through the agency of the strangely-acting underground stream than from the actions of the conspirators, Bud and Nort flashed their lanterns on the water-course behind them and around the bend which they had turned to behold the strange scene.

"It's going down!" cried Bud, for there was no longer any advantage in concealment or silence, as long as Del Pinzo and the others had fled. "It's receding!"

"Just as the other did!" added Dick. "They must have opened a gate here and let the water out!"

"They've done something!" cried Bud, "and we've got to find out what it is."

"Did you hear that about a fuse?" demanded Snake. "Maybe they're going to blow the place up!"

"If they do, and the tunnel caves in, good-bye to my water!" said Bud.

"Yes, and good-night to *us!*" grimly added Old Billee.

"Come on!" cried Yellin' Kid. "Let's see what's up there in that hole in the wall, anyhow!"

"And have your guns ready!" warned Snake Purdee.

However, as it developed, the weapons were not needed. When the boy ranchers and their friends managed to scramble up the rocky way, above and to the right of the second hidden, branching stream, and found themselves in what was virtually a little natural recess hollowed out of the rocky wall, they saw that it was deserted.

But there were plain evidences of the fact that the men they had seen had fled in a hurry, as, indeed, they had practically witnessed. Playing cards, cigarettes, tobacco and bottles were scattered on a rude wooden table, and there were several candle-ends stuck in the necks of

flasks. The smell of the extinguished candles was heavy on the air.

"But where did they go?" asked Bud, when a hasty glance around the rocky room disclosed no occupants.

"What's that?" asked Dick, pointing to what seemed to be a hole in the floor at one corner.

"It's a passage!" cried Billee, holding his lantern above it. "An' big enough, even for me! I'm going down!"

"Will it be safe?" asked Nort. "It may lead into the stream, or to where they have planted a mine—they spoke of a fuse——"

"You've got to take chances in times like these!" declared Old Billee. "I guess if they went down it will suit us."

"Unless they can close it up, or turn water in," suggested Snake, dubiously.

"Git out! I'm going down!" stoutly declared the rather fleshy veteran cow puncher, and when he let himself down the hole the others followed.

There was a natural stairway, or what served the same purpose, leading down out of the stone room where the conspirators had been evidently plotting so far underground. The passage went down, at first, like a flight of steep, cellar stairs. Then it straightened out, and, after twists and turns, led upward.

"Where are we going?" asked Nort.

"Nobody knows!" grimly answered Bud. "But it's safe so far!"

"And we're right on their trail!" added Snake.

"How do you know?" asked Billee.

For answer Snake paused and pointed to a smouldering cigarette stub on the rocky floor of the passage that had led out of the conspirators' niche.

"That wasn't dropped many minutes ago," declared the cowboy. "They came along here."

This was evident, but it was also evident that Del Pinzo and his conspirators were sufficiently in advance to escape. For, with another sudden turn, the passage led to another natural, rocky stairway, and when this had been mounted the boy ranchers found themselves again in the main tunnel.

"What's this?" cried Bud, when it was evident that they had come back to the place whence they had started, but farther on, and nearer to the river end of the tunnel. "This is a regular maze!"

"But where is Del Pinzo?" asked Dick.

"Out there, I fancy," and Nort pointed to where the main tunnel extended under the mountain and beyond, to the dam in Pocut River. "They've gotten away!"

"And about time, too!" added Snake, "or they'd be trapped as we may be!"

"Trapped!" cried Old Billee. "What do you mean?"

"I mean there's a mine set here, somewhere! Don't you smell powder smoke?"

A sharp, acrid odor, once smelled never forgotten, came to the nostrils of all as they stood there in the tunnel, while the stream flowed beside them. Whatever the conspirators had done, they had, evidently, not shut off all the water.

"There it is!" cried Dick, and he pointed to where, in the light of the lanterns, there could be seen, slowly ascending, a thin wisp of smoke.

"Look out!" yelled Old Billee as Dick dashed forward. "It may explode!"

Then, as Dick rushed up with his lantern, they saw trailing over the floor of the tunnel, and on the same side of the stream as themselves, a thin white fuse, like a sinister snake. It was this burning fuse which caused the smoke.

It was the work of but an instant for Dick to step on it, and extinguish the smouldering spark, while it yet had some distance to travel before the fuse lost itself in a mass of rocks.

"Whew! That was a close call!" exclaimed Bud, when the fuse was entirely out.

"Let's see where it leads to," suggested Snake.

They followed it up, and discovered a hidden mine of explosives, tamped down into a hole

that had been drilled in the rocky floor. Iron bars, hammers and other mining implements showed that the perpetrators of the dastardly deed had evidently fled in a hurry.

"They were going to blow up the tunnel!" cried Nort.

"And when that collapsed it would mean the end of Flume Valley," spoke Bud soberly. "We never could have opened the tunnel again, with all these strange, branching streams playing around inside."

"But we reached here just in time!" declared Old Billee. "Now let's get t' th' bottom of this. We know there's a main stream, an' two branching streams. One of th' branching streams is controlled by th' water gate with th' copper handle."

"And there must be another gate here, or else Del Pinzo and his crowd couldn't have shut off the water as they did before they ran away," went on Bud. "There must be a whole maze of water-courses in this old tunnel. Probably the Aztecs dug 'em to save their gold and other valuables. But I'd like to know what that roaring is?" and as Bud and the others listened they could hear a subdued murmur, a rumbling and roaring sound, that seemed to shake the whole tunnel near where they stood.

"Maybe this leads to it," suggested Dick, as he walked along and suddenly flashed his

lantern across another opening—a natural stairway leading down into black depths.

"Let's try it," said Bud.

Down it they went, one at a time, carrying their lanterns. And as they advanced, descending until they came to a level passage, the murmur and roaring became louder.

"Would you look at that!" suddenly cried Bud, in an awe-stricken voice, as he came to a stop and pointed ahead.

And then, as the others gathered about him and looked, they saw a wondrous sight.

They had entered a cavern, similar to the one where Nort had been found, but not so large. And from the very centre, it appeared, of the uneven rocky floor of the cave there spouted out a stream of water about three inches in diameter.

Solid white was this stream of water, like a bar of glass, and it shot out of a round hole in the floor as a stream comes from the nozzle of a fire hose. It was inclined at an angle of about forty-five degrees, was this strange stream of water, and whence it came and whither it went to the boys and their friends could only guess.

It was this powerful, rushing stream, under immense head and power it seemed, that caused the rumbling, roaring sound. It appeared to strike against some rocky wall a long distance off, so far that the light of the lanterns could not penetrate to it, and the searchers did not

feel like venturing beyond the point where the terrific stream issued.

That it was of awful power was evidenced a moment later, for Bud, who had picked up one of the bars of iron, used by the conspirators to set their sinister mine, approached the stream and, raising the bar, brought it down with all his force on the white, spurting jet.

On an instant the heavy rod was torn from his grasp, and whirled forward into the blackness beyond. There was a ringing, metallic sound as it hit some distant rock, and then it came bounding back, sliding across the rocky floor to the very feet of the searchers.

"Look at that!" murmured Bud, as he stooped and picked up the bar. It was bent and twisted into a sort of combined S and U shape, mute evidence of the terrific power of the stream.

"That would bore right through a man!" said Dick.

"Like making a hole in cheese!" added Old Billee. "This is a terrible place! Let's get out!"

CHAPTER XXV

HAPPY VALLEY

LEAVING behind them the roaring, rumbling jet of white water that came from the unknown and went thitherward, the boy ranchers and their friends made their way back to the main tunnel.

"Well, there are two things we have to settle," declared Bud, when they had sat down on convenient rocks, near the running stream, and began to consider matters.

"What are they?" asked Nort.

"One is, what effect has the turning of that lever we worked on the main stream? The other is, where is the lever that Del Pinzo and his gang shifted to cause this second branch stream to stop running?"

"And when we find answers to those two questions," said Dick, "I think we'll have solved the mystery."

"Right!" cried Bud. "So let's get at them. In the first place some of us will go back and shift the lever on the big rock in the first cave, while some of us stay here to see what happens."

The party was divided and when watches had been adjusted to mark the same time, so it might be known how many minutes elapsed between the shifting of the lever and any noticeable effect, Dick, Old Billee and Snake went to the first cave—that of the huge boulder.

It did not take long to demonstrate that when the water flowed from the main stream into that side branch, the stream nearer the river end of the tunnel went dry. But even with that no water passed along the main tunnel so that it would flow into the reservoir of Flume Valley.

"The water must flow out of the first big cave by some outlet we know nothing about," decided Bud. "Now we'll look for the second water gate."

They found the lever that controlled this in a corner of the upper, rocky room where Del Pinzo and his conspirators had been plotting when discovered. And when this lever was pulled from the position in which the seekers found it after the Mexican half-breed fled, the second stream (by which I mean the one nearest the river end of the tunnel) filled with water. But this did not affect the first.

And not until both levers were set at positions which caused the branch streams to empty, did any water fill the end of the tunnel near Bud's ranch.

But when this had been done; when the secret of working the levers was discovered, and

water was once again flowing along the valley end of the tunnel, where the stream bed had been dry for two days, then Bud cried:

"The fight is over and we've won!"

"I wouldn't say that yet," spoke Old Billee cautiously. "Del Pinzo an' Hank Fisher are still around an' above ground. But I guess you've put a crimp in 'em, boys!"

"I reckon!" shouted Yellin' Kid. "But are we sure that the water now goes to Flume Valley?"

"We'll soon find out," declared Bud. "We're almost out of the tunnel now, and we can 'phone back and ask."

And a little later they did emerge from the mysterious underground tunnel, with its still stranger water courses. But what was their surprise to find that night had fallen—in fact it was not exactly night, but nearly morning of the next day.

For a moment coming out into the dark night bewildered them. And then, as they stood at the mouth of the mysterious tunnel under the mountain, there was a sharp crack.

"Look out!" yelled Bud, as a bullet "zinged" viciously over their heads.

In an instant Old Billee had whipped out his gun and sent a shot toward a group of horsemen along the river bank.

"There they are! Del Pinzo and his gang!"

yelled Dick, as another bullet sang over his head. "Come on! Let's get 'em!"

"No use!" drawled Snake. "They've got hosses—we ain't!"

And a moment later the gang of conspirators, firing another harmless shot, swept out of view.

A group of men swarmed from the store and adjacent shacks, roused by the early-morning shooting, and with amazement they greeted our friends and heard the strange story.

"What day is it?" asked Bud.

"Friday," some one answered.

The mystery-solvers looked at one another in amazement.

They had been in the tunnel nearly forty-eight hours without sleep, nor did they feel the need of it, so exciting were the events that transpired.

But late, or, rather, early as it was, they managed to get in the store to use the telephone. And when the gray dawn was breaking across Pocut River, Bud learned, over the wire, from one of his father's cowboys left at Flume Valley, that the reservoir was again being filled.

"Hurray! It's all right!" yelled Bud, almost as loudly as the Kid would have done. "I guess, from now on, we'll have no trouble. But I'm going to see if we can't get Del Pinzo.

He and his gang certainly tried to blow up the place, and us with it."

"To say nothing of trying, as I believe, to drown us like rats in there, by shutting off and turning on those queer streams," added Nort.

"Do you think they really meant to drown us or blow us up?" asked Dick.

That question was never answered, for Del Pinzo and his more intimate associates disappeared after their flight from the tunnel, when they fled following the shifting of the lever and the lighting of the fuse.

There was dynamite tamped in among the rocks, and but for the stamping out of the fuse the tunnel never would have carried any more water to Flume Valley, and those in it might never have come out.

Hank Fisher stoutly denied that Del Pinzo was acting for him either in planting the explosives or in shutting off the water from the reservoir of the boy ranchers. But everyone had their suspicions.

For that it was Del Pinzo who has sent, or caused to be sent the mysterious warnings, no one doubted. Nor did anyone doubt but that the vicious Mexican half-breed had played tricks with the water.

For that is what they amounted to—tricks. Who built the copper-lever-controlled water gates, putting them in to utilize the winding underground streams, no one could tell. It may

have been the Aztecs. The powerful, slanting stream of water, it was discovered, formed the outlet of the shunted-in-river stream when the two side channels were opened so that Flume Valley's water supply was cut off.

The water gates and the underground streams formed the chief mystery, and these never could be fully explored. It was thought too dangerous. How Del Pinzo discovered the workings of the levers, utilizing them to try to end the rule of the boy ranchers in Flume Valley, was not disclosed for many years.

"You won't have any further trouble, now that the gates are closed and the levers taken off," Mr. Merkel said, for that had been done. "You'll get all the water you want in Flume Valley."

"Guess I'll call it Happy Valley," said Bud, "for everything is coming out right, now."

"In spite of black rabbits!" chuckled Old Billee.

"Yes, even with black jacks!" laughed Bud. "Everything is working fine, now."

And so it was. For with the discovery of the secret water gates and the disappearance of Del Pinzo, the epidemic died away. Though this, of course, was due to the arrest of Pocut Pete.

That scoundrel was found guilty and sentenced to a long term in prison. But he kept his counsel, and never actually confessed that

it was Hank Fisher who set him to this dastardly trick—if, indeed, it was that unscrupulous ranchman of Double Z.

That it was rustlers from Double Z who had tried to drive off some of the boy ranchers' cattle was not doubted, the finding of the branding iron being regarded as telltale evidence. But this was not enough to cause any arrests.

"Well, what are we going to do next?" asked Dick, of his brother and cousin, when they were fishing in the reservoir one evening, as, with the closing of the hidden gates and the uninterrupted flow of the water, many more finny prizes could be hooked.

"Get ready for a big shipment of cattle," said Bud. "I never saw any finer stock than we have here in Happy Valley. That's our next move—reap the benefits of our hard work."

But the lads did more than that. And those of you who wish to follow their fortunes further may do so in the next volume of this series, which will be called: "The Boy Ranchers on the Trail; or Diamond X After Cattle Rustlers."

"Who's that down at camp?" asked Dick, as he pulled up a good-sized fish and put it beside him on the grass.

"Looks like Nell and your mother," said Nort to Bud.

"It is!" Bud cried. "They said they'd come

over, and Nell promised to bring a pie! Come on; we got enough fish!"

And down the reservoir rushed the boy ranchers to greet their visitors.

"Any pie, Nell?" cried Bud.

"Sure," was the answer. "But it's for company—Dick and Nort!"

"Ho! I'd like to see 'em grab it all!" challenged Bud, as he reached for the basket his sister held. "By Zip Foster I would!"

"Say, who is Zip Foster anyhow?" demanded Nort.

"Oh, I'll tell you—later!" chuckled Bud, and, as he removed the cover of the basket, delighted "Oh!" and "Ah!" exclamations came from him and his cousins at the sight within.

Some of the cowboys came riding back to camp from the round-up, Old Billee cheerfully chanting:

"Oh, bury me deep on th' lone prairie!"

And with this happy mingling of the joyful and sad we will take leave of the boy ranchers for a time.

THE END

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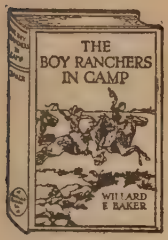

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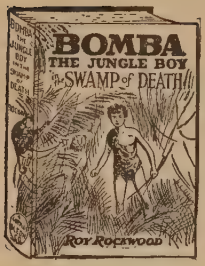

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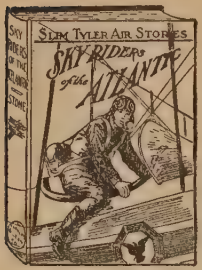

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